

Drowning in Crystal Sand

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Drowning in Crystal Sand

by [Elflcarii](#)

Summary

As Bosacius' eyes caught up with his arms he found himself struggling to pull the blow. The sharp whirlwind they'd been fighting...was a child. A bony, bruised, clearly starved child who wasn't fighting anymore, just standing there swaying, looking towards the dais. Warrior or not, opponent or not, Bosacius couldn't bring himself to kill a child.

Notes

Hey all! So, I went on a Genshin fic bender recently and noticed that one of my favorite

little niches was...lacking in stories. The few I found were very good, yes, but there weren't enough of them. So I decided to try to add to the pile myself.

If the story tags weren't sufficient warning, this fic will get very dark. I will be aiming to end on a high note, but the path there will not be easy. So if you don't like dark fics this probably isn't for you. That said, I will try to include relevant trigger warnings at the start of each chapter so readers can skip over particular things they don't like.

I don't have a beta and haven't tried to write a fic in about a decade and a half, so apologies if my writing is kind of rough, especially at the start. Hopefully I'll improve as I go.

Trigger warnings for this chapter: Severe injury to a child, signs of abuse, implied slavery

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Inspired by [Impermanence of Stone](#) by [Anonemoni](#)
- Inspired by [Take Flight on Golden Wings](#) by [Terra Argentum](#)
- Inspired by [Home is Where They Are](#) by [WhalesandStars](#)

An End and a Beginning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alatus struck and dodged, moving like the wind as he fought the invaders. His Master's orders pressed on his mind, throbbing in their intensity - defense of the domain had been one of the first, and most-repeated duties. He didn't even think to try to fight it. These invaders were stronger than usual, though...

Usually, the attackers would be ill-equipped humans, attacking in furious vengeance. Occasionally, some lesser god who thought they could conquer what Master Moharus had already claimed. Always, they were easy for Alatus and Master's other servants to defeat. Yet now he found himself struggling against just two warriors, one slight and near as quick as he, and one enormous, with four arms and a claymore, and far quicker than anyone that size had a right to be.

The small adeptus dodged a blow from the four-armed one only to take a cut on the shoulder from the slight one's sword. Wincing, he concluded that he'd never get anywhere fighting both at once. He'd have to take one out of the fight...Alatus took a risk and darted as if to strike at the large one, then teleported behind the other as they started to react. His back was now to the whole room's battle, but it wouldn't be for long. He swung the shaft of his battered spear, sweeping the sword-wielder's legs, then stabbed with the blade without really looking. It wasn't likely to be a killing blow, but at the moment, he just needed them out of the fight. Promptly teleporting back to his original position, he took aim at his larger opponent, who was still turning back to him after looking at where he'd been moments before -

'TO ME TO ME TO ME'

Alatus swayed as the new orders thundered in his head, instinctively looking towards the source. His Master was fighting what was clearly another god on the dais and - losing? The orders thundered in his head again, demanding he come to Master's aid, but before he could teleport there was a sharp pain in his side and he found himself pinned to the wall. A moment later the pressure...

...stopped.

For the first time Alatus could remember, there were no orders beating at his mind.

He stood there in shock, barely perceiving the continuing battle around him, as glittering sand fell across his face.

Bosacius' muscles ached. He'd never expected to be stuck fighting *one warrior* for so long, especially not with Yanlais' help. She might be only a junior yaksha, but she knew how to complement his fighting style like no-one else. This opponent, though - they were almost more pointy, stabby whirlwind than living being! If he hadn't seen them stop and crouch a few times, he'd have wondered if what he was fighting even *had* a physical form. He had no idea how many times - if any - he and Yanlais had landed blows, though he knew the two of them were covered in minor cuts, and he had one not-so-minor that had barely missed the tendons above an elbow.

Gradually he grew better at tracking the whirlwind's movements, and managed to pin the warrior between his strike and Yanlais'. Blood flew - Aha, a strike! But no time to rejoice, they were already coming for him again - or not? Gone, but for a swirl of anemo - he heard Yanlais cry out and swung to look, only to see another swirl. Immediately he turned back and started to swing in front of himself, suspecting their opponent would return there for the next strike.

As Bosacius' eyes caught up with his arms he found himself struggling to pull the blow. The sharp whirlwind they'd been fighting...was a child. A bony, bruised, clearly *starved* child who wasn't fighting anymore, just standing there swaying, looking towards the dais.

Warrior or not, opponent or not, Bosacius couldn't bring himself to kill a *child*.

His swing had too much inertia to stop entirely, and though the yaksha kept from cutting him in half entirely the blade bit deeply into the child's side. They barely even flinched, just stared blankly at him for a moment - and then the gem on their forehead dissolved into sand, and the whirlwind's eyes rolled up in their head. Bosacius caught them before they could cut himself further on the Yaksha's blade - it was stuck in the wall, perhaps he wouldn't have cut the kid in half after all - and looked back to see Yanlais getting to her feet, holding her shoulder. She was fine. Good.

The fighting was slowing down as their opponents realized their god was dead, but Bosacius still heard some clanging and cries down the halls. It would take a few minutes for word to spread, he supposed. He looked back at the child. They were so light it only took one arm to hold them up, but he used two for steadiness. He knew enough combat medicine to know the child would likely bleed out quickly once his claymore was removed, but beyond that...he was no healer.

He knew it was stupid.

Whatever else they may be, this little warrior was their enemy.

But...they were a child. Morax had taken in those who had previously served their dead enemies in the past, if they agreed to an appropriate contract. Surely...surely he would be as reluctant to kill a child out of hand as he. The danger was past, clearly. He was unconscious and could hurt no-one.

And there was something odd about the way he'd just stood there, and the way that gem had crumbled.

Bosacius heard Yanlais moving to his side.

"What are you *doing* ? Just finish it off already!"

"They're just a child, Yanlais. I won't be a child killer. Not unless Lord Morax forces the issue."

"Then I'll do it for you! You know what it must be, don't you? That fighting style matches the rumors perfectly!" Yanlais raised her sword and stepped forward, and Bosacius immediately blocked her path with the arms he wasn't using to hold the child up.

"I don't care if they *are* the demon Alatus. You didn't see what happened at the end there...something strange is going on. And above all, they are a *child*."

"And you are a sentimental fool."

"Maybe. But you are under my command, and I say they live until Lord Morax passes judgement."

"Until I pass judgement on what, exactly?"

Both yaksha turned to see their god approaching, and bowed their heads briefly in respect as he came closer. Morax's eyes narrowed as he viewed the tableau.

"What, exactly, is going on here? Bosacius, why is there a *child* on your blade?"

Well, there went any doubts as to whether their lord was on his side of the argument. At least initially. Still, Bosacius swallowed hard before replying. Morax could be...terrifying...when he was angry.

His junior didn't seem to notice though, jumping in before he could respond.

"That *child* is Alatus! The Bloodhound of Moharus, the Devourer of Dreams, the *demon* who slaughters whole villages! Surely it is too dangerous to-

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Bosacius had to fight not to smile as his very vocal subordinate practically swallowed her own tongue when Morax turned his glare on her. All humor slid away as that same glare turned back to him, though.

"I agree with Yanlais' assessment of the child's identity, my lord, given their strength and fighting style. However, they are, after all, a *child*. Also...something very strange happened at the end of the battle. I don't think the child fought because they wanted to. And I think the only reason my blade was able to strike them was because they *stopped* fighting. I beg mercy for the child - at least until we know more."

Morax's face was expressionless as he considered, but then it often was, when they were outside his realm. '*Stars, don't make me kill the kid. Please...*' It felt like hours before Morax spoke, though it couldn't have been more than a couple minutes.

"Very well. I, too, am reluctant to cut such a young life short. And I am...troubled, by their appearance. We will have to take precautions, but I will reserve judgement on...Alatus...until we know more. Remove your blade. I will heal the child enough to stop the bleeding, at least."

Bosacius stepped to the side so his god could approach, maintaining his hold on the child's body as he pulled the blade from the wall and their side in one smooth motion. He watched as Morax stepped forward and put one clawed hand on the child's forehead, the other on their chest, and sent a pulse of geo energy into their body. And he sighed with relief as new, fragile skin covered the child's wounds.

Morax stepped back, and shot Bosacius an unreadable look.

"You will carry him. Tell me if he begins to stir. Do not let him escape."

The yaksha nodded, and gently lifted the - boy, apparently - trying not to wince at how light he was. How much of the damage Alatus had caused was forced? Surely he wasn't in this condition because he served Moharus by *choice* ...Bosacius saw Morax beckoning, and stepped closer. Morax put a hand on his shoulder, and a moment later the three were surrounded by the golden light of geo.

The other yaksha would have to handle the cleanup.

So there's the first chapter! I hope someone enjoys it. Next one will be longer, I promise - I'm already writing it, but my nerves were too twitchy to wait for a buffer before posting the first one.

A New Contract

Chapter Notes

Wow, the response has been amazing! Thank you everyone! I hope the second chapter doesn't disappoint.

Don't expect updates quite this fast on a regular basis XD I just couldn't leave things with just that tiny little first chapter. I will be aiming for updating at least once a week.

TW for this chapter: slavery, reactions to abuse, implied torture, minor self-harm, minor self-cannibalism - I think that about covers it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Morax sat by the door, chin resting on folded fingers, elbows resting on his knees, and watched the boy sleep. To think Alatus was a child...it put quite a conundrum in his lap. He knew the majority of his people would be calling for Alatus' death, or at the very least for Morax to cast him out, if they knew the child's identity. Yanlais and Bosacius were sworn to secrecy until a decision was made, but if he chose to allow the boy to stay, the god knew that might not be enough.

Given what it was said Alatus had done, the ruined villages and horrified, cowed people he had witnessed with his own eyes, *could* he justify letting the boy stay? Child or not, Alatus had irreparably harmed a great many, and killed many more, mostly innocents. His heart cracked every time he looked too closely at the child in the bed - his too-pale skin, the bones practically jutting out, the bruising and scars - but his first responsibility was to the people he protected. If the boy turned out to be irretrievably violent and cruel...

Bosacius did not think he would. The yaksha had argued quite passionately that Alatus should be given a chance, pointing out over and over the way the boy had simply *stopped* the moment Moharus had died. That was, indeed, an argument in the boy's favor, but it was not enough to make a decision on alone. He needed to know how willingly the boy had followed such a cruel god. He needed to know if Alatus reveled in blood and ruin, as the reports said. And eating dreams...given the results of such an action, if the boy showed any reluctance at all to stop, Morax did not think he could risk it.

Bosacius was already convinced that the boy was forced somehow, but Bosacius had always had a soft heart. Madame Ping also seemed convinced...Morax winced as he recalled the lecture he'd received after she'd tended Alatus.

"You can't possibly be thinking of casting him back out, Morax! That boy has been through hell!"

"I may not have a choice." He sighed. "If he is dangerous enough, I may even be forced to kill him here, before he can do more damage. The things he has done..."

"If he is the one who did all those things, and I have my doubts, I guarantee they were either not by choice or not in his right mind. Have you even looked at him? Partly healed broken bones,

bruising of a wide variety of ages, burns of pyro, electro, and cryo source, adeptal energy at very low levels - how he fought like that I don't know - and to be as starved as he is, I'm not sure he's eaten in years. All besides his new wounds. And there's something off about his nervous system, something I've not seen before..."

Tears streamed down the healing adeptus' face.

"You know the nature of the god you slew, Morax. Do you really think that bastard would treat him this way for being too violent?"

Morax rubbed his temples. It was not so simple...

"Moharus was a sadistic and violent god, yes. He may have tormented the boy just to hear his screams, to see him in pain, Madame Ping. It may have nothing to do with how willing he was to follow his god's path. This is why I must talk to him, and if he is willing, sign him to a contract."

"Fine! Do it your way. But if you cause any further harm to that child, don't expect me to forgive you any time soon."

Morax stared after the woman as she stalked away. He hoped she was right. He hoped they could save the child, rather than ending him. It tore at his heart to think of any child treated in such a way. But he could not break contract. He had to protect his people.

Of course, the other side of the argument was every bit as vehement. Young Yanlais had actually started cussing him out for hesitating before Bosacius put a hand over her mouth and bodily dragged her away, apologizing and promising to give her a talking to. Morax suspected a lecture would do little to dent her nature; he was constantly surprised that the little firebrand wielded geo, and not pyro. He sighed and moved to rub his temples again. The whole situation was giving him quite the headache. Guizhong would've known what to do.

...Nevermind. Guizhong would've instantly moved to bring the child in, without question. She never seemed to understand the hard choices Morax sometimes had to make for their security.

That didn't mean she'd be wrong this time, though. There might be a chance. A small one. And if there wasn't...if the child truly was the danger and demon the stories labeled him...better the blood stain *his* hands. He wouldn't condemn one of his yaksha to the task.

His musings were interrupted by a faint moan from the bed. The child fell silent, whimpered, then seemed to wake with a jolt, and before Morax could move he was on the floor next to the bed, prostrated in what looked like a very uncomfortable position.

"This one is sorry, Master, this one did not mean to sleep, please forgive this lowly one, please..."

Morax froze halfway up from the chair as the frantic words seemed to knife him in the gut, staring at the trembling boy before him. Slowly he knelt, trying to get closer without terrifying the young adeptus further.

"I am not your master. Your master is dead. Please, sit up. That cannot be comfortable."

Slowly, shaking like there was an earthquake beneath his skin, the boy sat up. His gaze remained on the floor. Morax sighed. That was probably the best he could expect at this point. He would

have to commend Bosacius' insight - this was not the behavior of one who served their god freely. A trickle of movement caught his eye. Madame Ping was going to kill him. Apparently the child had reopened the wound on his side with that quick motion, not surprising, really. Best to be about this quickly, then.

"Are you the one called Alatus?"

When Alatus awoke, when he realized what that meant, panic bit his throat. When he felt the unmistakable power in the room, the panic grew. *Sleep wasn't allowed*. Such as he did not need or deserve such a luxury. To sleep in front of the Master was infinitely worse. He leapt for the floor, to the proper submissive posture, ignoring the fabric that caught and twisted around his right ankle. Maybe if he cowered enough, begged enough, he would be spared the worst of the punishment...maybe his wings would be left alone, this time.

"This one is sorry, Master, this one did not mean to sleep, please forgive this lowly one, please..."

He trailed off, both to wait for a response, and because he'd slowly realized that the great power he sensed was not the familiar and feared cryo, but geo. And, if anything, it was stronger than his master's. He swallowed, or tried to - his throat was too dry, and tried to cough instead, an instinct he ruthlessly suppressed. Showing weakness after *sleeping* would only make things worse.

Alatus felt the power draw closer, and fought the urge to flinch back.

"I am not your master. Your master is dead. Please, sit up. That cannot be comfortable."

Comfortable? What did it matter if it was comfortable? Submission was demanded by gods, always, more so from one like him. Wait...what did the strange god mean his master was...

Memory returned in a rush, the flurry of battle, the call, looking to the dais in time to see a strange god plunge a spear towards Master's chest, the pounding in his head stopping, everything stopping -

So. This one had slain his master, and taken him as...a trophy? A weapon? What was to be his purpose now? What would he be made to do by this new master? Slowly, shaking with terror, he sat up as demanded, carefully keeping his head bowed. He would not offend this new god with his gaze.

"Are you the one called Alatus?"

The god knew his name. He must know Alatus' abilities as well then. He would have to...Alatus closed his eyes and refused to finish the thought.

"...yes."

"Did you, as reported, slaughter multiple villages and devour the dreams of others, in service to Moharus?"

"Y-yes, master."

There was a moment of silence while Alatus wondered if he'd done something wrong, and how to

fix it.

“Do you wish to continue to slaughter and kill?”

Did he wish? What did his wishes matter?

“I-I obey my master...”

“ *Do you wish it?* ”

The god’s anger reverberated through Alatus’ body and he crouched low once more, shaking. For a long, terrifying moment his throat was too tight to speak, and he knew, *knew* that if he didn’t answer he would be punished, would be hurt...finally he managed a whisper.

“No.”

He cringed down. He didn’t know what answer the god wanted, so he gave the truth, and prayed it would be enough.

“And dreams? Do you still wish to consume them?”

Dreams? They were sweet, cloying, gave him brief glimpses of happiness...others’ happiness. Not his own. And seeing his victim go blank-eyed, the horror of those around them...the bitterness of those memories was impossible to shut away entirely. No, he did not want to eat dreams. He had never had a choice. It was why his master kept him, what made him a useful tool.

But if this strange god wanted the truth...he took the chance.

“No. This one does not wish to eat dreams.”

The shaking stopped as Alatus gave in to what would come. Most likely, he would be punished, hurt, molded into whatever plans this new master had for him. But he *hadn’t* been immediately been struck down for admitting his desire, and for the first time he could remember, he felt the faintest stirrings of hope.

Morax stared at the child before him. He wasn’t shaking anymore. That had to be a good thing, right? He once again wished his beloved Guizhong was there to advise him, especially now that it was clear she would have been right, along with Madame Ping and Bosacius.

He hated terrifying the child.

But there was one more thing he had to do.

“Look at me.”

For a long moment, the boy didn’t move. Then slowly his gaze lifted, hesitating somewhere around Morax’s nose, before rising to meet his eyes. The trembling was back. Damn.

“I cannot release you until you are fully healed. That would be irresponsible. However, I would not keep you locked in a single room like a prisoner, given a choice. Would you be willing to agree to a contract?”

Confusion and fear in those golden eyes, and something else Morax couldn't read.

"Contract?"

"A contract is an agreement between two or more parties. This allows for a certain amount of trust, as each can be certain the other will abide by the terms."

The confusion was stronger now.

"This one does not understand."

And the little one cringed, though he did not break his gaze. Morax sighed. Simpler terminology then. And quickly, given that the boy was bleeding.

"A contract between the two of us would mean that each of us would swear to do certain things, follow certain rules. If either of us were to break those rules, we would have to suffer a punishment commensurate with the breach. In this case, the contract I am offering is to care for and protect you, and see you healed, until such time as the healing is complete. In return, you must agree to touch no weapon without my permission, to harm no human for any reason, not to eat dreams, and not to leave the areas I tell you are permitted unless accompanied by myself or a designated representative. Do you understand and agree?"

A long pause this time as Alatus clearly worked to think things through.

"This one...might understand...but...gods are not punished..."

Morax raised an eyebrow.

"Trust me, little one, gods are punished all the time."

It was clear the boy didn't believe him, but also clear he was not going to try to argue.

"This one...agrees."

The god heaved a sigh of relief.

"I am glad. Now please, return to the bed and wait here for a moment. I will bring a healer to tend to your immediate problems, and then we will move you somewhere more comfortable."

Alatus nodded, his gaze once again to the floor. He moved to stand and promptly tripped over the blanket, which was somehow wrapped around his ankle. Morax lunged to catch him, then overbalanced as the boy flinched out of his arms so violently he flung himself the other way - luckily onto the bed. The God of Contracts was less fortunate, fetching up against the room's small table and straining the hip he'd injured in the battle with Moharus. He couldn't quite suppress a wince.

"I was only trying to catch you, child. I would not hurt you..."

He trailed off as he realized the boy was now crouched on the bed with his arms around his head, rocking and whispering something over and over. He staggered properly to his feet and approached in what he hoped was a non-threatening manner.

"Alatus?"

"Sorry sorry this one is sorry master sorry didn't mean to fall sorry please don't hurt me please..."

Morax's heart broke.

"I am not going to hurt you. That would break the rules, remember? You have nothing to be sorry about."

He reached out a hand to comfort, and the boy flinched away violently.

He didn't know what to do.

'*Guizhong...*'

"Alright. I will not touch you, then. Please, just stay here and calm down. I am going to get Madame Ping. She is a healer. She will know what to do..."

Morax was blathering. He never blathered.

"Just...stay here."

He quietly backed to the door, and stepped out of the subspace prison, designed long ago for cases like these where someone they didn't know if they could trust wanted to join them, or just live in the harbor. He hoped Alatus would listen and stay on the bed, but even if he didn't, he would be unable to leave the room. He paused for a moment to catch a breath and take firm control of his emotions, then took off at a sprint for the entrance of Madame Ping's home subspace, which doubled as their hospital. He ignored the increasing twinge in his hip with every jarring step; it was ridiculous to teleport such a short distance. He was there and through the entrance in short order; a pause to sense for where Madame Ping's location and he was off to the kitchen, no longer sprinting, but certainly walking - limping - very quickly.

"Morax! You're limping! And here's blood on your shirt...I told you, if you - "

"He reopened the wound in his side, but it was not my doing. He reacted...overstrongly to my presence when he awoke. More importantly, he is now upset, and I do not know what to do. You are a healer, surely you can help him."

"Of course I'll help him. Are you done *interrogating* the poor child?"

The adeptus swept up her basket of herbs as she moved back towards the entrance with Morax.

"We have a contract. Once you have dealt with the immediate issue, I would like to move him here for the time being, if that is amenable."

"You had doubts? He would have been here from the start if I'd had my way."

"I know. You and Bosacius were right, Madame Ping. I don't know *how* that...beast of a god...managed to force such a powerful child to do those things, but it seems he did."

The two ran in silence for a moment.

"I had to know. I am sorry for the delay I caused, but I had to *know*."

Madame Ping sighed.

"I know, Morax. You are what you are."

The sound of the door closing caught Alatus' attention. The sudden lack of *any* sense of the god had him jerking his head up to stare around wildly.

He was gone. He had actually...left. Without punishing Alatus for his weakness, or for forcing the god to act with his clumsiness, or for his presumption in asking questions, or...the list of things he'd done in the last half hour that Master would have responded to by leaving him writhing on the floor in agony was too long to think about.

And this strange god, presumably his new master, had simply...left.

New panicked thoughts started imposing themselves on his brain. What if he'd only gone to get the tools to punish him properly? Or to get proper restraints...there didn't seem to be any in this room, and *that* realization distracted him for a moment...Or maybe he was the sort that didn't like to get his hands dirty, and he was going to get someone else to do the job? He vaguely remembered the god mentioning a healer, was that to keep him from bleeding out when they were done? Master had sometimes used them for such purposes.

Alatus couldn't stop shaking. He wanted to hide in the corner, but his new master had told him to stay, so he didn't dare move. So he did the next best thing, and summoned his wings to surround him.

It had never made any sense. His wings were a vulnerability. Master used them against him all the time. But he always felt a little calmer, a little safer when he wrapped them around himself. He ran his fingers through the feathers, slowly calming himself with the soothing sensation.

The new god hadn't punished him yet. Fear and shaking only ever made him mess up more. Calm was better. Hide his emotions behind a blank face. When he could manage that, it was always safer.

Alatus mindlessly tugged at one of his feathers until it came loose, hardly noticing the prick of pain. That was soothing too, somehow. He absently chewed at the bloody end before making a face at the taste and spitting it out. He didn't know why he always did *that*, either. It always tasted horrible.

Suddenly he heard sounds at the door. He instantly hid his wings away again and dropped the feather, bowing back down in the proper submissive posture. He felt the overwhelming presence of the strange god as he entered, along with a lesser, gentler presence.

"Alatus, this is Madame Ping, the healer I told you about. She's..."

The deep voice trailed off, and Alatus realized he was shaking again. Was that wrong? He hoped it wasn't bad, it was hard to control...

"Morax, out. You're scaring him."

A warm, higher-pitched voice, stern at the moment. A woman's, maybe.

"But..."

"*Out*. I'll get you when we're done. I can hardly treat him properly if he's shaking like a leaf."

A heavy sigh, and the heavy golden presence faded, then disappeared as he heard the door click shut. Footsteps coming closer; he tensed, unsure what to expect.

“It’s alright, he’s gone. You can relax, child.”

He didn’t move.

“I’m just an adeptus, like you. There’s no need for such a posture. Please, sit up and let me have a look at you.”

...like him? No, she didn’t sound scared, or flat. If she was no god, and he could feel she was not, she at least had more status than he, the lowest of the low.

“You’re bleeding. At least let me have a look, hmm? That’s what I’m here for, to care for your wounds.”

That...contract thing. The god had said something about healing. Alatus swallowed, or tried to - at least he didn’t almost cough this time - and slowly sat upright, keeping his eyes low as always.

“That’s better. Looks like the blood’s coming from the wound on your side. Could you lift your arm for me? Not too high - I know that shoulder’s been hurt too.”

She didn’t *sound* angry. Master didn’t always sound angry before he struck, but pretty much everyone else did. He lifted his arm halfway, and watched carefully out of the corner of his eye for sudden motion, just in case.

“Thank you. Now, I’m going to have to touch you for a moment, to see how badly it’s been reopened. It won’t hurt, I promise.”

A slightly wrinkled hand slowly came into view, glowing with green energy. Alatus licked his lips and held very still, telling himself repeatedly that pulling away would be very bad. He managed to keep from doing more than flinching a little as her hand touched his side - and as promised, to his surprise, it didn’t hurt. A moment later the hand pulled away.

“Very good. Thank you for being brave for me, child. We’re lucky, it looks like only the outer layers were torn, but I think we need something more secure than my earlier quick fix, hmm? Why don’t you lie down, this might leave you a little dizzy.”

Earlier? ...oh. She must’ve done something while he slept. That explained why he hadn’t been bleeding everywhere from the start. She seemed...honestly nice, so far. He hadn’t met many people like that. Most of them he’d had to...he shut off that line of thought fast.

For a long moment, Alatus considered whether he dared disobey the lady. He hated lying down. Lying down meant being helpless, being unable to move quickly, *pain and burning and laughter and* - Stop. Stop.

She had been accompanied by the god. Assume she had his authority.

He laid down.

“Thank you, child. This might feel strange, but it shouldn’t hurt. I’m going to have to touch you again.”

Alatus couldn’t help but glance at her nervously - if he couldn’t sense her power, he would have thought her any middle-aged woman from a village - before squeezing his eyes shut and waiting,

muscles tensed to the point he thought he could hear his bones creak. He flinched again as warm fingers touched his forehead and the skin near the wound in his side. He heard a sigh, then felt energy spreading into his body from those hands.

She was right. It felt *weird* .

It felt like the skin and muscle by the wound were moving around by themselves, writhing like his muscles sometimes did when they cramped, except it didn't hurt. A few other places felt like they were moving too, but not as much, and not for long. But the energy itself started to hurt before long. He felt his heart beating faster and harder, it was getting harder to breathe -

And the hands pulled away.

"I'm sorry, child. It looks like your body can't handle much healing at a time right now. Nevermind, that'll hold for now, and we can try some more tomorrow, hmm?"

After a while, it became clear she was waiting for an answer. He nodded.

"Alright, you can get up now. We're going to go to a place that'll be your new home, for the time being. It's much nicer than this little room, you'll see."

Alatus sat up quickly.

"But...the god said this one can't..."

"Lord Morax, the god you talked to, is right outside. He'll be going with us."

Alatus hesitated, then got to his feet, wobbling a bit as the predicted dizziness hit. If the god really was just outside, then if he stayed just inside the door until the orders were confirmed, he should be fine. Probably.

The woman led the way to the door, glancing back at him a few times to make sure he was following before opening it to reveal a sunny hillside dotted with flowers. The god - Lord Morax - was indeed just outside, and Alatus quickly diverted his gaze back to the floor as he turned to look their way.

"He is well?"

"As well as he can be at the moment, I think. Come along, child."

Alatus shuffled his feet in the entryway.

"It is alright. I am here to escort you, so you are not breaking contract. Also, you may consider Madame Ping one of my representatives in the future."

He nodded and responded softly as he stepped through the door.

"Yes, master."

...he could almost swear the god flinched. Why would he do that?and why did Madame Ping's presence suddenly feel so angry? Caught between the two, Alatus hunched down between his shoulders as he walked. This did not bode well.

Lord Morax cleared his throat.

"I have been thinking about the matter of your protection. Your name is too well known; there are

many who would seek vengeance for what you did at your former master's bidding. In order to protect you, a new name is needed, to conceal your identity. In the fables of another land, the name Xiao is that of a spirit who encountered great suffering and hardship. He endured much suffering, as you have. Use this name from now on."

A new name...part of him didn't see why it mattered. But another part of him felt strangely light, as though shedding his old name might allow him to escape everything that name touched.

Alatus - no, Xiao - nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you might recognize Xiao's behavior with the feathers. For the rest of you, a short explanation: Stressed birds often pluck their own feathers. Malnourished birds not only pluck, they chew on the quills to get the nutrients. Xiao is most definitely both stressed and malnourished at this time.

Sleep deep, dream well, everyone!

Meetings and Tending

Chapter Notes

This chapter is entirely too long. I blame Bosacius. He also gets the blame for the fluff. Hope you enjoy!

TW for this chapter: reference to torture and abuse, minor self-harm, panic attacks, ummm...I'm too tired to think straight, sorry! If I missed a tw, please feel free to tell me in the comments and I'll update this.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Bosacius paced the hilltop, ignoring the concerned eyes of his fellow generals. They knew he couldn't stay still when he was worried, but they didn't know *why* he was worried, and he wasn't permitted to tell them.

It had almost a full day since they'd brought Alatus to the harbor. Morax had made him leave the child in the bed of a prison subspace, then sent him for Madame Ping. When his god had caught him pacing outside the entrance, he had been told to leave, that word would be sent once things were settled. So he'd watched from a distance as the healer left, then several hours later when Morax *sprinted* out of there to Madame Ping's, and then the two had rushed back. Morax standing, arms folded, at the entrance. Madame Ping coming out, and the boy walking between them to her subspace.

He had tried to go there, to find out what had happened, and Morax had stopped him at the entrance. Told him to wait. Then a few hours later he had stepped outside and told Bosacius to gather the other three generals, his brother and sisters, where none could hear.

That had been almost an hour ago.

Bosacius didn't know why he was so anxious, so invested in the child. Part of him acknowledged that his lord had been right to be cautious, but his soul rebelled at the notion. He could not bring himself to believe the boy was truly bloodthirsty. Not when his memory kept replaying those wide, shocked eyes over and over, the moments before Alatus collapsed. Not when he could still *feel* his blade sinking into the little whirlwind's side...he scrubbed the offending hands against his pant leg, trying to drown the sensation.

Soft footsteps in the grass, a familiar golden power approaching. Bosacius looked up to see Morax striding towards them, and frowned. The god's gait was not quite even. It couldn't quite be called a limp, but it was clear that he was still injured from the battle. The yaksha shook his head. One worry at a time. He already knew it was near impossible to get his lord to rest when he should. He'd leave that argument for Madame Ping, she was better at it.

"Good, you are all here."

"What's this about, Morax? We haven't heard about any approaching armies, no new threats since yesterday's battle..."

Trust Menogias to get straight to the point.

“I have taken in a new adeptus. A child. I would like for the four of you to help me with him.”

Silence for a beat.

“Why us? We’re warriors, not...caretakers. I’m not sure how much help we could be...”

Children were a bit of a sore point with Bonanus. She had been hurt too many times by them running away after seeing her large, clawed hands.

“The situation is...unique.”

Morax sighed.

“This is not to go beyond you four - I would not tell you at all if the information were not necessary - ”

Sharp eyes aimed at each of them in turn, except Bosacius. Probably because he already knew what was coming.

”- the child, who will be going by Xiao from now on, is the one previously known as Alatus.”

Dead silence.

Then the explosion.

“What do you *mean*- “

“Are you **insane** ?!”

“My lord, surely-“

“ENOUGH!”

Grumbles and silence.

“My word on this is final. The boy and I have a contract. It is not a permanent contract - only until he heals - but for the duration, he will be here, and he must be kept safe. I assure you, those actions of his you may have heard about - “

Another grumble, another pointed glare, this time from eyes glowing gold.

” - were committed under duress, and not of the boy’s own will.”

Morax sighed, and rubbed at his temple. Bosacius hadn’t seen him look so tired in...awhile. He stepped forward. Unlike the others, he had no hesitation when it came to helping that little whirlwind.

“What do you need us to do?”

“Xiao has agreed, under contract, not to touch weapons, harm humans, or eat dreams. However, he has been forced to do these things for...a very long time, and Madame Ping has reminded me that long habits are hard to break. Someone to help him control himself should his instincts go astray may be of help, and the four of you and Madame Ping are the only ones I dare trust with his identity.”

“In addition, Xiao is...severely traumatized. I will not go into the details, though some of it will be

obvious once you see him. He is easily frightened, reacts strongly to physical contact, and his whole world has just been turned upside down. He will undoubtedly have panic attacks from time to time, and as he is already powerful and only likely to get more so as he recovers, I would like someone nearby at all times capable of containing him should his power threaten others or himself while he is in an emotional state.”

That made a great deal of sense. Too much sense, really, for their blockhead of a leader - Morax was never very good at this sort of thing. Bosacius suspected he was directly quoting Madame Ping.

“Another aspect of Xiao’s contract is that he is not permitted outside designated areas without an approved escort. I would like to tell him the four of you qualify. If any of you feel you cannot handle these...unusual...additional duties, please tell me now.”

There was a long moment of silence before Bosacius realized they were all looking at him.

“Bosacius? This is why you’ve been worried all morning, isn’t it? What do you think?”

...right. Of course they’d figure it out. He scrubbed a hand through his hair and looked back at Indarias.

“I was the one who carried him back, and I for one intend to help all I can. Each of you will need to make your own decision, but I think he’s worth saving. I told our lord as much.”

Morax nodded.

“Yes, you did. Repeatedly.”

Bosacius flushed.

Menogias stepped forward and put his hand on Bosacius’ shoulder.

“You’ve always had a talent for judging a person’s character. If you’re helping, I will too.”

Indarias snorted softly.

“Hard to believe the Alatus we’ve heard so much about is just a child. I’m in.”

“If Lord Morax requests it, who am I to refuse? Just don’t blame me if he screams and hides behind the nearest tree when he sees my hands.”

With Bonanus, that made for all of them. Bosacius sighed with relief. It was never fun when they were at odds with each other. He looked to Morax.

“When do we meet him properly?”

“Tomorrow. I believe he has had a trying day already. If you could all come by Madame Ping’s around midmorning, that would be ideal.”

The others made various noises of agreement, and then left, talking together as they walked back down the hill. Indarias glanced back, but nodded and kept going when Bosacius shook his head.

“My lord...”

He hesitated.

“Do you need something, Bosacius?”

“Alat- Xiao. How is he doing?”

The god’s distracted gaze focused on him, and softened.

“Madame Ping says he’s doing as well as can be expected, under the circumstances. I think it may be a long time before it can honestly be said that he is doing well.”

Guilt stabbed through him, though he knew the wound from his blade was probably the least of the boy’s problems.

“And his side?”

Morax sighed.

“Unfortunately, his body can’t handle much of an influx of energy at the moment, and that is slowing the healing. It is at least not bleeding everywhere.”

And then more, under the god’s breath -

“When he’s not trying to leap around everywhere, anyway...”

Bosacius blinked. ‘...*what?!*’

“Leaping around? He has that much energy, in the shape he’s in?”

“Not...exactly. Nevermind.”

The god began walking back down the hill, and Bosacius matched his pace for a few moments.

Damn it. Courage wasn’t usually an issue.

But this wasn’t a usual situation.

The yaksha loved kids, and he often volunteered to help out with the human ones in the village - town, really, these days, but ‘long habits are hard to break’ - down by the harbor. A heartbreaking number of them were orphans, given the war, and extra hands to watch them were always welcomed. Most of the orphans, and some few of the others, were traumatized to some level or other when they arrived. He’d learned a lot about how to deal with it from the human healers over the years, and was fairly certain he could use that knowledge to help the little whirlwind.

If his presence alone didn’t make things worse. The last time Alatus - Xiao - had seen him, they had been opponents in deadly combat. His siblings had a neutral start, he did not, and he didn’t want to taint the boy’s meeting with the others. It would likely be better to introduce himself separately.

While all that was true, Bosacius had to admit to himself, at least, that it was an excuse.

He wanted to see for himself that the kid was...well, not fine, that wasn’t likely possible at this point...but managing. Not terrified out of his wits. Not terrified of *him*. Because those eyes already haunted him, and he wanted to protect and teach that whirlwind as a big brother should, whether that made sense or not.

Maybe it was because they didn’t have many adeпти children here. Helping and protecting was all well and good, but he didn’t dare get too attached, their lives were too short.

Regardless, he was scared, if he was honest. Not of the kid, but that the kid wouldn't be able to tolerate his presence. Or worse, that he'd screw the kid up somehow - some of these kids, all it took was the wrong mis-step to royally ruin their lives for a long time. Logically, he knew he was far less likely to make such a mistake than *Morax* of all people - oh, for the days when Guizhong was around to teach him why bluntness wasn't always the answer - but since when did emotions answer readily to logic?

Bosacius was jerked from his musings when he realized they'd stopped walking, and that *Morax* had been eyeing him for awhile. He coughed and tried to cover a sudden flush of embarrassment.

"I gather you had something else you wished to ask me."

'Courage, Bosacius.'

"Given my history with...Xiao, I thought it might be best if I introduced myself separately from the others."

"And you want to do this now."

"If Madame Ping thinks he can handle it. If it's a total disaster I can leave and try later; but the odds of a disaster are lower if he's not being presented with an overwhelming number of powerful new individuals at once."

Morax snorted.

"Four is not an overwhelming number."

"For him, it probably is."

The god sighed and rubbed at his temples.

"I...admit...dealing with this sort of thing is not my strongest skill. You likely have more experience in this regard than I do. Very well. If Madame Ping approves, you have my permission."

Bosacius sighed with relief.

"Thank you, my lord."

Alatus - no, Xiao - waited behind the closed door, listening as Madame Ping's footsteps moved away. Lord *Morax* had left a little earlier, muttering something about a meeting as Madame Ping showed the boy around this place they called a 'sub-space'.

Well, tried to. Xiao had rarely been able to bring himself to raise his eyes from the floor with Lord *Morax*'s heavy presence so close. He had worried he'd get in trouble for that, but while the god sometimes grumbled alarming, he never *did* anything, and Madame Ping had been so constant in her reassurances that he'd started to wonder if she'd mixed him up with someone else, someone who mattered. It was possible, in the clothes they'd insisted he change into - the young adeptus glanced down at himself in disbelief again. Instead of his usual rags, he wore a long sleeveless tunic that fell to the knees but split at the hip, and soft, loose pants beneath. These were definitely

not the clothes of his station.

Nothing here made sense.

The rules were simple enough - mostly - but drastically incomplete. There was the 'contract', of course. And the rules for this 'subspace', which was his allowed area for the time being - no going through red doors or opening red cupboards, be respectful to those he saw here, and 'don't go too near the edges, they're unstable'. That last one he didn't understand in the slightest, and simply concluded he'd stay in the building. But nothing whatsoever about his duties.

He hadn't dared to ask. Maybe later, sometime when it was just him and Madame Ping...

At the end of the tour he'd been shown this door, dark teal like his own hair, and told that the room beyond - the room he now stood in - was his, and everything inside was for his use. That was the most confusing of all. Such as he did not *own* things. Such as he were owned by others. It was while Madame Ping was telling him of this room that Lord Morax had excused himself, and shortly after she had gently pushed him towards 'his' door - he'd been too startled to flinch - and told him to have fun exploring, and look for her if he needed anything.

Nothing here made sense.

But at least, here he was alone, for the moment, and he was pretty sure he could hear or sense anyone coming from here, and maybe he could have some time to figure out some of what had happened in the last few hours before more strangeness and gods and words that he didn't know were thrown at him. After all, even Master had given him time to recover from time to time - though generally only when he was chained up.

Xiao absently rubbed a still-raw wrist, and finally turned around to look at the room. His jaw tightened and he started to shake.

This couldn't be the right room. They hadn't opened the door, maybe Madame Ping mixed them up. This room was twice the size of the one in which he'd agreed to the 'contract', there was a bed and a table and a couple pieces of furniture he didn't know the words for. Small objects littered the surfaces in the room - some he knew what were, some he didn't. There was a *carpet* in the middle of the floor. There were no chains or restraints of any kind, no area that seemed set aside for punishment. This room looked... *comfortable*. *Comfortable* was for those who were high enough to choose their own way, who were honored and valued by the gods, who weren't *useless* and *stained* and *broken*....

Movement caught the corner of Xiao's eye and he whipped his head around. One one of the unidentified pieces of furniture, there was a mirror. He knew what mirrors were - sometimes Master made him watch himself be hurt. The motion was just his reflection. As he stepped closer, he saw that his hair had begun to escape its tight braid, and trembled. He glanced nervously at the comb in front of the mirror. Not his, not his, but if he cleaned it right away maybe they wouldn't notice...Master was always adamant that his hair be kept back tightly, clear of his face to prominently display -

- the gem.

Xiao's eyes snapped back to the mirror. The gem was gone. The awful, glittering, cold gem on his forehead that had been there as long as he could remember. All that remained was a faint scar. His shaking hands froze where they'd been frantically pulling his hair back, slowly reaching to verify that the mirror wasn't lying, somehow. He hesitated a moment just before touching the scar - touching the gem *hurt*, and a ghost of anticipated pain slithered along his nerves - but nothing

happened.

It was gone.

It was really, truly gone.

The young adeptus stared blankly at his reflection for a long moment, unable to believe it. Slowly, he realized the familiarity of standing orders pulsing at his mind was...gone. That none of the orders he'd received since he'd woken had beat at anything but his ears. That he had not been *compelled*, that his body had not moved against his will, in the same amount of time. That the familiar pain had not shot along his nerves in the longest time he could remember.

And then, he realized that his new master had seemed to feel no need for further reinforcement of the rules of the...'contract'...beyond stating that breaking them would result in punishment.

Just how bad *was* this punishment?

Trembling became violent shaking.

Master had always punished disobedience harshly, but had still always seemed to expect it, be prepared for it, giving out little reminders whenever he'd hesitated for the slightest moment. Lord Morax did not seem to question obedience. What could be so bad it would ensure one never even *thought* of disobeying? The rules were simple. Short. Easy to obey - so far. But what if more were added? What of the ones he didn't fully understand?

He didn't remember moving to the corner, or falling to his knees. He didn't remember summoning his wings, or when he'd started shakily running fingers through feathers. Thoughts spun in circles, panic curling around him tightly and making his chest hurt and making it hard to breathe. Images of terrifying possible punishments flitted through his mind - limbs being burned off, being left frozen in a block of ice for days on end, being forced to eat nightmares until his body ripped itself apart - along with the knowledge that there was always, always something worse he couldn't imagine.

Slowly, bloody feathers began to litter the floor.

Slowly, Xiao managed to calm himself down.

It was simple, after all. Never, ever break a rule. Never, ever disobey Master Morax. Don't risk it. Don't hesitate. There was nothing he could do about rules he didn't know about yet, but he would learn them in time, and once he knew them, he would obey them. In the meantime, when in doubt, he could follow Master Moharus' rules unless they conflicted with the new ones. That might keep him safe.

A breath of wind teased Xiao's hair, laden with voices almost too faint to hear. Instinctively he moved to cover his ears, then paused.

Before, the snippets of sound around his name the wind brought had always been painful. It was either someone cursing him for something he'd done, or Master Moharus discussing plans for him. The first...hurt, and the second only meant wasting time and energy on dread. So it was better not to listen. But maybe, just maybe...if something he heard helped him make sense of this new place...he cautiously lowered his hands to listen.

"...going by Xiao from....previously known as Alatus."

That was...Master Morax's voice.

"...heard Alatus is gone!"

He didn't know that one. Probably someone he'd hurt.

"Xiao has agreed.....addition, Xiao is severely....of Xiao's contract..."

Master Morax again.

"...believe the Alatus we've heard so...."

A woman's voice.

"Alat- Xiao. How is..."

A man's voice, deep but not as deep as Lord Morax's.

A long pause, but the breeze did not fade away.

"...with...Xiao, I thought..."

That same man's voice.

The breeze faded away this time, and Xiao considered what he'd heard. It was clear Master Morax had been talking about him with someone, possibly the other man. Why, he wasn't sure...but the really weird thing was that none of the voices had held anger, or disdain, or disgust, or any of the other emotions he usually heard when he was mentioned.

The young adeptus frowned. It was too strange. He couldn't make any sense of it, and he hadn't really learned anything useful. But...it hadn't hurt, either. Maybe he'd start listening more often, when the wind came.

His musings were interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the hall. Xiao jerked his head up, immediately hiding his wings away and sweeping the fallen feathers out of sight under the bed. He'd dispose of them properly later, if he had the chance. He felt air on his back and panicked as he realized that he'd ripped the tunic when he'd summoned wings...he scooted back, pressing his back tight to the wall, and prayed that no-one would notice. He knew it was useless, it would be obvious as soon as he bowed, but he had to do *something*...

...and the footsteps continued past his door. He remained tense for awhile, waiting, in case they came back. He'd just begun to relax when he heard the footsteps again, along with another, much heavier pair - he stretched out his senses and felt Madame Ping's presence and another, much more powerful than her but weaker by far than Master Morax.

The second presence was *electro*.

He started to shake again. Were they coming to punish him after all? He'd done so many things wrong by Master's standards in the last few hours, and nothing had happened. Were they storing it all up to be dealt with all at once? Was there a time of day for punishments?

The footsteps stopped at his door.

Bosacius ducked through the pass-through to Madame Ping's sub-space, a few steps behind Morax. He knew he wouldn't really hit his head, but the entrance always felt too small for his bulk. Glancing at Morax as he caught up, he was surprised to see that his lord looked hesitant, and even more surprised when he knocked on the door. Madame Ping was a very welcoming adeptus, and her home was open to all who needed her help, or just wanted to chat. Why was *Morax*, of all people, knocking?

Catching his curious gaze, Morax chuckled awkwardly.

"Madame Ping and I have...conflicted...a bit, with regards to the boy's treatment. It harms none to be polite."

Bosacius raised an eyebrow as he turned back to the door, lips twitching as he fought a smile. If Morax had interfered with how Madame Ping wanted to tend to a patient, 'conflicted a bit' was likely a significant understatement.

After a short wait, the door opened to reveal the black-haired adeptus, who barely glanced at Bosacius before narrowing her eyes at Morax.

"No."

"I was not - "

"No, Morax. I will not stop you from interacting with the boy tomorrow, but I need him *calm* at some point before nightfall, and your presence clearly terrifies him."

"I had no intention - "

"Damn it Morax, you would not let me treat him fully before the contract, and after you were done with him the poor boy would've leapt through a *wall* if I'd so much as tried to apply a salve. He needs a chance to relax! **No!** "

The narrowed eyes were now full-on glare. Morax stepped back, hands up in surrender. Bosacius discreetly rubbed at his mouth to hide a grin - his lord would *not* appreciate being laughed at right now.

"I assure you, Madame Ping, I did not come here with any intent to terrorize the boy. I was merely bringing Bosacius by, as he thought he might be able to help."

Madame Ping's gaze swung around and locked on him. He wiped away the remains of a smirk and shifted to stand a little more formally.

"As you know, I have some experience with traumatized children..."

"I remember. But were you not also one of the ones who injured him?"

"I...yes."

"Hmm. It could go either way...."

The adeptus paused in thought, still blocking the doorway.

"Very well. You have enough experience to know if you are doing more harm than good, if it becomes clear this is the case, leave and come get me immediately. As for you - "

Morax was pinned by her glare once more.

“If you come back here before tomorrow, except in the *highly* unlikely event I send for you, I will tell Indarias, Menogias, and *Cloud Retainer* that you need to be kept off that hip.”

Morax’s eyes widened, and Bosacius swore the god positively fled the sub-space. The adeptus chuckled. Lord Morax might rule these lands and the people, but in some things, *no-one* outranked their chief healer.

His smile faded as he turned back to Madame Ping.

“How is he? Lord Morax wouldn’t say much.”

“And he was right not to. Privacy is important. But if you are to be involved in his recovery...”

The healer sighed and leaned against the doorframe.

“I cannot be certain precisely how bad it is. I was not able to do a comprehensive reading - his adeptal energy is so sapped that his body can hardly handle a few seconds of healing, and I could not waste that little bit of tolerance for more than a quick glance to target the worst areas. But I can tell you that he has suffered long-term physical abuse, and quite likely outright torture. I have never seen an adeptus so emaciated - I don’t even want to imagine how long it’s been since he ate something. If you can get him to drink a glass of water, maybe a little broth, I will be very grateful. He doesn’t move like he’s injured, but he is covered in bruises, scars, and burns. I caught a glimpse of several broken bones, apparently healing, with that quick reading...handle him like glass, if you come in physical contact, won’t you?”

Bosacius swallowed and nodded. This was...worse, even, than he had assumed.

“Not that he’s likely to let you. I was barely able to get him to tolerate my touch for those few seconds of healing.”

The healer sighed.

“On one thing Morax and I are agreed. Between how he chooses to address Morax, his answers to his questions, his injuries and reactions...we are fairly certain that he did not serve that... *Moharus...*”

Her mouth twisted with distaste and anger at the name.

”...in the traditional sense. We are fairly certain that he was a slave, in every sense of the word.”

Bosacius froze. Slavery was not exactly uncommon with humans, though Morax did not tolerate it here. Darker gods often kept human slaves, and mortals seemed to do it to each other with disturbing frequency. But adepts, as a whole, were too powerful to be kept as such - mere chains and threats would not hold them for long, and it generally took far more energy and power to keep an adeptus captive, much less to force them to obey, than would be gotten out of them in work or battle.

“*How?*”

“We don’t know. I might find a clue when I can do a proper reading - there was something odd about his nervous system - but if not, I suspect the only way we’ll ever know is if he chooses to tell us. And why would he hand us the means to do the same?”

Bosacius turned and leaned his back against the wall next to the door, pinching the bridge of his nose and closing his eyes to process. He didn’t know what he’d expected, but not *this*. He’d

thought maybe the kid had been brainwashed by an abusive family member. Or drugged. There were a few ways one could force the hand of an adeptus, especially a young one, temporarily. He'd tried not to think how far back the reports of destruction had gone, knowing it would be a primary argument of others for the boy's willingness. This explained a great deal. It opened up more questions than it answered. And depending just how young the little whirlwind was enslaved, it meant that it would be much, much harder to help him than he'd assumed, and he'd never thought it would be an easy road.

There was no question he'd try.

But oh, his heart hurt already.

He opened his eyes and looked to Madame Ping, noting the measuring gaze in her eyes.

"Where is he?"

The healer searched his face a moment longer, than nodded.

"I have given him a room, for all I doubt he believes it's actually his. He's been in there for the past hour or so. If all goes well, I will join you after an hour or two and we can see about tending some of those injuries properly. If all doesn't go well..."

She sighed.

"We'll get to that if it happens. This way."

Bosacius followed Madame Ping down a hall to dark teal door, which she knocked on gently.

"Xiao?"

Silence.

"Xiao, child, I'm going to come in, alright? I have someone to introduce you to."

Madame Ping opened the door - slowly but fully, Bosacius noted in approval, so the boy would be less likely to feel trapped. But of course she'd know such a basic thing; she'd probably taught the human healers he'd learned from.

Scared golden eyes looked at them from the corner behind the bed for a moment, before the boy's head ducked down and all that was visible was a bit of dark hair.

"This is Bosacius, child. All he wants is to talk to you. Is that alright?"

No response.

"Would you like me to stay?"

No response. Madame Ping sighed.

"If you want me to come, for any reason, just call out, alright, Xiao? I won't be far."

The two adepti waited, and eventually the hair bobbed in what was probably a short nod.

The healer reached up to grip Bosacius' shoulder briefly, before nodding her head towards the kitchen to indicate where she'd be and leaving. The yaksha entered the room, moving slowly and quietly but *not* silently - he wasn't trying to hide where he was, and if he seemed to be, it might

scare Xiao - to a spot on the far side of the room from the bed, and close to the far wall, where he wasn't between the boy and the exit. He sat on the floor slowly and carefully, and settled into a relaxed and nonthreatening posture before looking back up towards the other corner.

Golden eyes met his for a brief moment, and he thought he saw a flicker of recognition, before the child's head ducked down again. Tall though he was, seated this far away he couldn't even that bit of hair over the bed. That was fine. The first step was always about patience, especially with the more frightened children. It was like luring a wild bird or squirrel to eat seeds from one's hand. He knew his large form was scary at first, almost always. So he had to give his little whirlwind time to get used to his presence. More so, probably, since as an adepti Xiao could probably sense his power as well.

So he would sit, quietly and unthreateningly, until the little adeptus felt safe enough to make the first move.

...Bosacius wished he'd thought to bring something to juggle. That always seemed to ease the tension faster, and it gave him something to do.

It took less time than he expected for those eyes to pop back up over the bed again, though the adeptus didn't like the way their owner was clearly shaking.

"A-aren't you here to p-punish this one?"

The yaksha's heart stopped. Why would he think...the *courage* to ask directly...he struggled to keep his voice calm and soothingly low.

"No, little whirlwind. Why would you think that?"

Silence for a moment.

"M-mighty one is electro."

Mighty one. Bosacius kinda liked that, except that he suspected it had very different connotations to Xiao. He badly wanted to ask why the child associated electro with punishment, for all he knew he wouldn't like the answer, but this wasn't the time. It was far too early for lancing soul-wounds. Basic trust first.

"I wield electro, yes. But I don't use it to hurt others outside of battle."

A blink, and the head ducked down again. Bosacius waited patiently.

"I-is this one not to be punished, then?"

"Why would you be punished?"

A pause. Not unexpected. He wondered if Xiao would answer.

"Th-this one has been c-clumsy, and forced the god to action, and s-stupid, and hesitated to o-obey, and did not answer honorable one's questions, and *slept* , in front of the *god*, and - "

This litany was getting too painful to hear. Bosacius could hear in the young voice that if Xiao was not already crying, he was on the edge of it, and he saw no reason to drag this out further.

"None of that is worthy of punishment."

He could practically *feel* the disbelief coming from the other end of the room. He would have to be

a bit firm, if he wanted a chance to nip this fear in the bud...it was unlikely he could stop it entirely, but if the young adeptus could stop being terrified of every little mis-step, it would go a long way in helping him to settle in.

“M-master Moharus would - “

“It doesn’t matter what Moharus would do. He is dead, and frankly, was a terrible brute. Here, under Lord Morax, such things are not considered bad. Certainly not punishment worthy.”

Well, a couple of those were a bit rude, but that distinction could be made another time.

The silence stretched.

“This one does not understand.”

“Did you break your contract?”

“No!”

“Did you break Madame Ping’s rules?”

“This one does not th-think so...”

“Then you don’t deserve to be punished.”

A pause, then the eyes appeared again, assessing. Probably trying to figure out if he was telling the truth.

“Why is the mighty one here, then?”

Bosacius smiled.

“I wanted to see how you were doing, little whirlwind. I wouldn’t mind getting to know you, as well.”

The confusion in those golden eyes. He had to work to maintain that slight smile; Xiao would undoubtedly interpret anything else poorly.

“This one does not understand.”

“That’s alright. I hope you will someday soon.”

The boy looked away, but did not hunch back down. Progress.

“Would you like to hear a story?”

If he couldn’t juggle...

”...this one does not know.”

“Hmm. How about I start, and if you don’t like it, let me know, okay? I promise I won’t be mad. I tell lots of stories, and not everyone likes the same ones.”

A short nod. Well, then.

“Once upon a time, there was a little whirlwind.”

Eyes snapped back to him. Bosacius restrained a grin, keeping his expression steady. Inserting the audience *always* worked.

“The whirlwind loved to dance and spin in the forest in the fall, throwing leaves high into the air and watching them drift slowly back down. It was fun in the winter, too, throwing snow all about.”

“Once, the little whirlwind saw a woman slip and fall in the snow on the path through the woods. He felt bad, but he couldn’t help her, could only watch as she slowly picked herself up and limped on down the path. After that, every winter, the little whirlwind swirled up the snow on the path, and guided it to fall under the trees instead. That way no-one would slip.”

Bosacius carefully kept his gaze apparently distant, pointed vaguely in the direction of the window by the bed, as though his full attention was on the story he was telling. His heart soared as Xiao slowly climbed up to crouch on the bed instead of behind it, listening closely.

“He began to clear the leaves from the roadway in the fall as well. He couldn’t take credit; none of the mortals even know he was alive, just thinking he was a bit of wind passing by. He didn’t mind. With the path clear and safe, more people used it, and watching and listening to them kept spring and summer from being too boring.”

He was on the edge of the bed now, leaning forward, lips slightly parted. It was hard to tell without looking at him properly, but he was pretty sure Xiao wasn’t shaking at all anymore. Now, how best to connect the story to the boy’s situation...with his limited knowledge, and without being too direct...

“One year, the whirlwind realized that fewer and fewer people were coming down the path through the woods, and that they all looked scared. One day a whole *bunch* of people came at once, all going the same way, moving fast and not stopping to pick up the things they dropped. After that no-one came at all, and the whirlwind became very sad.”

The boy was on the floor on the near side of the bed now, slowly inching closer. Bosacius pretended not to notice.

“The little whirlwind thought that maybe if he brought the people the things they’d dropped, they might want to come back and spend time on his little path again. So he swirled as hard as he could, and though it was hard to keep all those heavy things in the air, and scary to leave the forest, he followed the path in the direction the people had fled.”

“The world beyond the woods was strange, and the little whirlwind saw many things he had not encountered before. Eventually he came to a small town. There was smoke in the air and a number of buildings were on fire, but the little whirlwind had not seen a town before, and thought this was normal. Overjoyed to find people again, he rushed up and started dropping those heavy things he’d struggled to carry so far around them. But instead of being happy to have their things back, the people screamed and put their hands over their heads and ran every which way. Confused, the little whirlwind backed up, trying to stay out of their way, and caught on the edge of one of the fires.”

Xiao was at the edge of arm’s reach now, and looking at the floor. Of course, this part of the story was probably starting to hit home a bit, that was expected - but he hadn’t thought a single story would be enough to draw the boy so close. He must have been so starved for companionship...Bosacius’ heart hurt, and he struggled to keep it from his face and voice, keeping his tone light and gentle.

“The fire leapt up within the little whirlwind, consuming and strengthening him both at once. He felt himself grow and expand, no longer a *little* whirlwind, but rather a towering pillar of wind and

fire and smoke. He pulled away, or tried to, fighting desperately to separate himself from the raging *thing* that had taken over. As he moved, though, everything around him caught fire, and by the time he stopped fighting in exhaustion, he realized that he had destroyed the town and killed the people in his panic. He wept with guilt and grief, but the fire didn't let him go."

Xiao had shifted out of immediate view now; Bosacius felt his presence against the wall to his side, only a few inches away. He wanted to see how the child was responding, but he couldn't turn to look without being obvious.

"The fire within him was hungry; it pulled him away from the town and the path into the plains, riding the spreading flame and growing stronger and taller with its power. The whirlwind was pulled along, with no choice any longer in what he did or where he went, and he sped along the grasslands ahead of a terrible grassfire. In no time at all another town came into view, larger than the last. In horror, the whirlwind cried out to the stars."

"Please, don't let me do this! I don't want to hurt anyone! Destroy me if you must, but stop me before I reach that town, someone, anyone!"

He could feel the young adeptus trembling next to him, practically up against his arms. He had guessed correctly how the boy felt about what he'd been made to do, then. He hoped the end of the story would help.

"The stars responded to the whirlwind's call quickly. Clouds swept the sky from horizon to horizon, and before the raging firestorm the whirlwind had become could reach the town, the downpour they unleashed put out all the fire. Without the power and fury to sustain him, the whirlwind shrunk down to half his original size, exhausted by the long fight and the pain tearing at his heart."

"Hearing the little whirlwind's sobs, the clouds leaned down, shifting to a comforting fog. 'Do not blame yourself, little one. You did not do this; the fire that controlled you did, and you fought hard to prevent it.' The little whirlwind straightened and looked about himself at the fog. 'But the fire could not have caused such destruction without my help! If only I had never left my forest...' The fog pressed closer, lending the whirlwind strength and trying to comfort him. 'One can never see the right decision so clearly as when it is past, but at that point one cannot change it. You began your journey out of a desire to help; that is no bad thing. Make amends for your mistakes, and learn from them, but do not let guilt for what you could not help bear you to the ground.'"

The trembling had stopped, and to Bosacius' surprise, Xiao actually leaned lightly against his arm.

"The little whirlwind sniffled and nodded. The fog lightened, happy to see him cheered. 'Would you like me to show you a place where you can be heard, so misunderstandings like this can't happen?' The little whirlwind agreed eagerly, and the clouds led him to an adepti village. The adepti, of course, not being mortal themselves, could easily hear the little whirlwind's voice, and were delighted to have such a being among them. They taught him how to suck up water from the river and become a waterspout to water crops and put out fires, and helped him learn to steady himself when carrying heavier things so he could put them down where he intended. They told him stories and jokes, laughed with him and befriended him. And they say the little whirlwind lives there still."

Bosacius fell silent, letting the story settle into his little whirlwind's mind. He was amused and heartened to realize Xiao was absently tracing his tattoos with one finger. After a long moment, the boy spoke.

"Could this one...hear another story?"

The yaksha smiled broadly, and his heart swelled.

“Of course. Once upon a time....”

Madame Ping made sure she had everything she needed in her basket, then headed down the hall with a smile on her face. She had no idea how Bosacius had done it, but when she'd stopped by earlier with water and broth, she had seen the little adeptus actually cuddled up to the yaksha's side. He'd sprung straight as soon as he'd seen her, of course, so she'd just left the glass and bowl on the table and nodded pleasantly to the two as she left. But now night was falling, and if she was to get a chance at treating the boy's wounds before he slept, it was now or never.

As she approached the still-open door to Xiao's room, she heard the soothing rumble of Bosacius' storytelling halt, and him asking the boy what was wrong. Xiao's response was too quiet for her ears, but when she reached the doorway she found two pairs of eyes staring in her direction, one in welcome and one in trepidation.

“I'm sorry to interrupt such fine storytelling, but it is getting late, and I need to tend to the little one's wounds.”

“This one thought honorable one had already done so...”

It was wonderful to hear the boy more willing to speak up, and she smiled encouragingly at him as she responded.

“I was not able to tend to all your injuries at that time, and wounds in general need tending many times before they fully heal.”

Xiao looked to Bosacius for confirmation, then back to her. It was such a relief to actually see his eyes.

“What is this one to do?”

The healer moved into the room, setting the basket on the table and moving the thankfully empty glass and unfortunately apparently untouched bowl of broth out of the way.

“Well, to start with, I think this will be more comfortable for us both if you were to move to the bed.”

The boy nodded and stood, and the yaksha stood as well.

“I should probably get out of your way, Madame Ping. Thank you for allowing me to stay so long.”

He got all of two steps before Xiao darted forward, seizing one of his left wrists in both hands briefly before snatching his hands away as if they were burned.

“Please...stay...”

Madame Ping had to look down and fiddle with the basket contents to hide her expression. The little one was clearly still afraid of her, but he had just as clearly formed a bond with Bosacius. That was something she had not hoped to see for a long time yet.

“It’s fine with me if that’s what you want.”

“Then of course I’ll stay, little whirlwind. Here, let’s get you to the bed.”

She waited until sounds indicated they were settled, then looked up with a bright smile to find them both seated on the bed, Bosacius far enough away to not get in her way but close enough to reach Xiao if he needed it. Xiao, unfortunately, had his head down again, and was staring at his knees as his hands gripped the blankets beneath him tightly. Madame Ping’s smile faltered, and she struggled not to let it flee entirely.

“Alright, little one. Is there any particular place that hurts most?”

“This one is not in pain, honorable one.”

Where *had* the boy gotten this ‘honorable one’ nonsense? And his response was patently untrue, though she supposed he could be so used to the pain he didn’t notice it anymore.

And didn’t *that* just break her heart.

She softened her tone further, careful to keep her words as gentle as possible.

“It’s just Madame Ping, child. Shall we start with your arms, then?”

The child was still for a moment, then quietly lifted the nearer arm towards her. She smiled at him and gently took his hand, trying to ignore his flinch, inspecting the arm carefully. This was his left, so there was of course that deep cut on the shoulder - the quick healing from earlier looked to be holding for now, but she’d like to give it stitches along with the one on his side if Xiao let her. She should probably leave that for the end, given that he was more likely to react negatively to needles than bandages or salves. Probably. Besides that, there were a number of small nicks and cuts in his skin, and what looked like a couple burns and a great deal of bruising under the dirt and grime. At least two of the little cuts looked infected.

She would’ve liked to get him clean earlier, but it had been hard enough to get him to change out of those more-hole-than-fabric rags.

“Alright, child. I’ll need to clean your arm first, and then I’ll see about getting some salve on those burns, hmm? Can you hold your arm still for me?”

She saw his other hand creeping to latch on to one of the yaksha’s, but Xiao nodded.

“Yes, Madame Ping.”

The healer smiled softly and took one of the cloths from the basket, soaking it briefly in the bowl of warm water she’d also brought. Some of the dirt looked ground in; she wouldn’t be able to get him all the way clean, but if she could just get the worst of it, it would reduce the risk of infection considerably. She couldn’t help but notice that the boy started trembling the moment she touched his skin with the damp cloth, for all she kept the motions as gentle and rhythmic as she could. He flinched every time the cloth came in contact with a cut or burn, but those were the places that needed cleaning the most. She couldn’t skip over them, so she kept up a soothing string of reassurances, not even remembering the words that fell out of her mouth.

At least the trembling didn’t get worse. As she set the dirtied cloth aside, she sighed and reached for the numbing salve. It would really be better to put antiseptic on everything that had broken skin, but it would sting quite a bit. The little one was barely holding it together and they’d just started. She’d have to keep that to the already infected places, for now, and better to start with something

that would improve how he felt. Putting on the special gloves she used with the salve in order to retain her own sense of touch, she began to gently rub the cream over first one burn, then the other.

Xiao flinched at first, then as it began to take effect she saw his eyes slowly widen and he relaxed a little. She smiled at him as she gently placed bandaging over the burns.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it? Now, this next bit will sting a little, but I promise it won’t last long.”

Moments later, an antiseptic cream had quickly but thoroughly applied to both infected cuts, and she turned her attention to his hand and the two swollen fingers she had been trying hard not to worry about since she’d discovered them while cleaning off his arm. Perhaps now that he might trust her a little...unlike the more recent and partly-magically-healed wounds on his shoulder and side, she couldn’t leave these. If they were broken as she suspected, letting them heal crooked would be a disaster.

“I’m afraid this is going to hurt, child. I have to straighten those fingers so they heal straight. I’ll be as quick as I can, alright?”

She knelt down to meet his eyes, and waited for his frightened nod.

“I’m right here, little whirlwind. You can squeeze my hand as hard as you need to, I’m not going anywhere.”

Xiao’s eyes flickered to Bosacius and he nodded again, tensing his jaw and closing his eyes.

Madame Ping was true to her word. With the speed and accuracy of millennia of practice, she pulled the fingers straight and bound them, with splints, to their neighbors.

“There we go, all done with this side. Would you like me to do your other arm or one of your legs next, little one?”

She worked as quickly and gently as she could, shoving her increasing fury down *hard* as she went. The boy’s rising fear and tension were obvious as his trembling slowly grew more pronounced and his flinches more violent, and she knew he would think she was angry at him, rather than for him. She didn’t dare speed things with healing power, remembering that morning, nor did she dare use it to evaluate. His body was already under too much stress. His legs and other arm went much the same as the first, though he had three broken fingers on the right instead of two. She didn’t know how he pushed through the pain to hold onto Bosacius like that.

They ran into a bit of a snag when she got to his torso. Madame Ping had to wait while Bosacius soothed Xiao out of near panic when she’d asked him to lift his shirt. She had no idea why - his old clothes had been so full of holes they hid nothing - but she wasn’t going to do anything to push his emotional state over the edge, if she could help it. Once it was off, he cooperated easily enough as she dealt with the damage on his front and lower back, but the higher on his back she got the worse he shook, so she gave up for now well short of his shoulder blades.

She noted that the number of electrical burns far outnumbered the burns from fire and frostbite.

Finally, Madame Ping stepped back with a sigh, setting the rest of a roll of bandages back in her basket and taking out a small vial of light green liquid.

“Very good, my brave child. Very good. We’re all done now. All you need to do is take this medicine, and then you can rest for the night.”

It was a tincture meant to fight infection, mixed with a painkiller, both with a side effect of

inducing sleep. The boy needed all the rest he could get, and she had no intention of letting fear keep him up all night.

Xiao obediently took the vial, shakes slowly subsiding as Bosacius gently rubbed his uninjured shoulder.

“Yes, Madame Ping. But this one does not require rest.”

Madame Ping chose not to comment on that as the boy quickly downed the vial’s contents and grimaced. The side effects hit him nearly immediately, and the exhausted child only managed to blink in confusion for a minute or two before he was out.

The healer quietly added the water glass and bowl of broth to her basket, careful not to spill, as Bosacius gently arranged Xiao in the bed and pulled the blankets over him. Then the two left the room, softly closing the door behind them.

“Thank you. I’m not sure how much he would’ve let me do, if you hadn’t been there.”

“I was hardly going to leave him after he pleaded like that.”

“Still, you have worked miracles with the boy. Given this morning, I didn’t expect him to let anyone that close for a very long time.”

“I don’t really understand it either. I’m good with kids, but...my best guess is he needed affection and comfort so badly it overwhelmed his fear as soon as I became non-scary enough.”

Madame Ping snorted a bit at his word choice. ‘Non-scary’.

“I’m glad he drank the water, but the broth?”

The yaksha sighed.

“The same as you saw at the end, there. He kept insisting he didn’t require food. That bastard must’ve really messed with his head, along with everything else.”

Madame Ping slammed the basket down on the counter as they reached the kitchen.

“That bastard is lucky he’s already dead. The condition that boy is in...”

“How bad is it? I was too focused on keeping him calm to pay much attention.”

“I was only able to treat surface damage, and not all of that. I can’t do much powered healing until his adeptal energy recovers more. But even that is bad enough.”

She sighed and turned around to lean back against the counter, arms crossed.

“It’s much as I told you earlier, with the addition of five - *five* - broken fingers. I can only imagine how much pain he’s been in, that he uses them without hesitation. Hardly an inch of him isn’t bruised or burned, and he has small cuts everywhere.”

She couldn’t hold the tears back anymore. She always tended to cry when she was angry, and she *hated* it. And what had been done to this child *hurt* .

“How could that - how could *anyone* - do that to a child?”

She covered her mouth as a strangled sob escaped, and looked away. A moment later, four strong

arms enfolded her.

“I don’t know.”

By the sound of the soft whisper, Bosacius was crying too.

Chapter End Notes

Sleep deep, dream well!

Nightmares and Nutrition

Chapter Notes

TW for this chapter: nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, self...not sure whether harm or mutilation is the better descriptor there..., torture, enslavement

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A brilliantly sunny day, hazy with heat. A young boy, hardly more than a toddler, walked along the road alone. He had small, downy wings sprouting from his back, and they would flap madly every time he jumped or skipped for the pure joy of movement, scattering bits of pale green fluff everywhere. He felt entirely safe here, so near home.

A cart rattled along the dirt and stone road, coming from the direction in which the boy was headed. Light flashed and flickered above the cart and at its sides; it was clearly some traveling merchant's cart, and it held plenty of shiny trinkets that might catch a child's eye. The merchant, a thin and bald but jovial man, smiled at the boy as he approached.

'Wait. I know this...'

"Why hello there, sweet child. Would you like to take a look?"

Attracted by the shine and glitter, the boy stuck a finger in his mouth before nodding eagerly. Laughing indulgently, the man let down the tray built into the side of the cart, revealing row after row of dazzling gems and jewelry, displayed to advantage on dark red velvet. Golden eyes widened in wonder and delight.

"Would you like to try one on? I have a mirror in here somewhere, so you can see how it looks. This one, perhaps?"

The man lifted the centerpiece of the display, a large, clear gem on a counterweighted chain that reflected the light more brilliantly than any other.

'No! Say no!'

The child bounced on his toes, little wings flapping, as he made grabby hands at the shiny object. The man smiled as he handed it over, then laughed at the boy's evident confusion as he moved the chain from side to side, peering at it from every angle.

"You wear that sort of gem like so."

He lifted out a similar piece, this one simple jade, and demonstrated how to set it along one's head with the counterweight in the back.

"Like tiss?"

The boy awkwardly put the counterweight behind his head, drawing the chain forward before -

'Don't!'

- pressing the brilliant gem to his forehead.

Everything froze for a moment, then the flesh near the gem writhed like there was something growing beneath the skin. The boy screamed.

‘S-stop!’

Then the same movement appeared under his skin everywhere else, and the boy was now on the ground writhing with the agony, still screaming.

‘P-please. It hurts. I d-don’t want to r-r-remember...’

Shadows moved, time passed. The screams continued.

Darkness fell, and still no one came for the boy.

The moon rose, and the screaming finally gave way to gasps and sobbing. There was a crunch of gravel, and the man, now clearly no mere merchant, stood before the boy.

“Hmm, a strong one, aren’t you. Good, good. You’re mine now, boy. Stand up and come here.”

The boy wildly shook his head, still sobbing, and pushed himself backwards with his hands and feet as fast as he could.

“Now, now, enough of that. Didn’t I just say you were mine?”

The boy suddenly stiffened, and his eyes widened in horror as his body smoothly stood and walked to the man.

“Very good. Just remember...if you ever defy me again...”

The man’s eyes were suddenly very cold, and seemed to drill into the boy’s very mind.

”...what you just experienced will look like a nice day at festival.”

Xiao woke screaming.

Early morning light filtered through the kitchen window as Morax quietly sipped his tea, trying to project patience. Madame Ping sat down at the little table with her own cup. He reminded himself that by now, she was probably more invested in the boy than he. He told himself that she wouldn’t withhold information on his situation out of sheer spite.

But she would if she didn’t think he deserved to know. Damn it.

He watched out of the corner of his eye as she sipped calmly and slowly, eyes closed in evident pleasure in the flavor. She lowered the cup and let out a pleased sigh, then raised it again.

...she was drawing this out on purpose, wasn't she...

He grumbled deep in his chest, and *knew* he didn't imagine the way the corner of her mouth twitched.

When she raised the cup for a *third* slow drag at the tea, he may have growled a little.

Madame Ping chuckled, and set the cup down.

"Alright, alright. I suppose I've tortured you enough."

"How is he?" He wasn't growling anymore. Much.

"Frankly, both better than I could have hoped, and worse than I feared. Bosacius worked miracles with him yesterday, and as a result I was able to treat almost all of his surface injuries and even got him to take some medication. Unfortunately, he seems to be...more badly injured than we knew, and has an outright terror of being touched in certain areas, even with the aid and comfort of someone he seems to trust. I'm worried what I'll find when I am able to actually get a close look there."

Morax grunted and folded his arms, staring down at his cooling tea. Given the reports his yaksha had provided on what they'd found in Moharus' domain, he couldn't say he was surprised. They had also reported a few mysteries, one of which had him quite concerned for the little adeptus.

"Were you able to get a good look at his forehead?"

"His...? You mean that odd recent scar? It seemed to be healing fine on his own, so I didn't prod at it, if that's what you mean. Even with Bosacius there it was a struggle just to get the open wounds dealt with. Why?"

"Just...something the yaksha found after the battle, that's all. If you say it seems fine, I'll trust your judgement."

"Hmm."

Madame Ping stared at him for a long moment consideringly, then turned back to her morning tea. He was glad she didn't question him further.

The yaksha hadn't found any other survivors, other than a few human slaves they'd promptly freed per his standing orders. Most of Moharus' warriors had fought to the death with a desperation that was disturbing; others had simply collapsed and stopped breathing when their god had died. And then there were the other bodies...bodies with a scar on the forehead like Xiao's, mostly without any mortal injuries but contorted as though they'd died in agony. All the bodies with that scar were adepti, or other similarly powerful beings. They were all down in some secret chambers that hadn't been found until late yesterday, along with a number of other strange and horrifying discoveries.

Morax saw no need to burden the healer with this, if it could be avoided.

"What of food, and rest? He clearly needed both, when I saw him last."

"The medication I gave him knocked him right out. I saw no reason to take chances there, when I could simply force the issue. He should wake in an hour or two. As for food...no luck there. He drank some water but flatly refused the broth he was offered, apparently repeatedly telling Bosacius he didn't 'require' food."

The healer took a quick, almost hurried gulp of her tea, glancing at him before looking away.

“I knew you were likely to show up this morning, and I hoped...he clearly sees you as an authority figure...”

The dragon stared at her, fury rising. It was all too easy to see what she was driving at. He felt scales trying to grow in, fangs trying to lengthen, and forced his form back to stability, holding his body still until he mastered his emotions.

“It has been abundantly clear he thinks I am his new *master*, not merely an *authority figure*. Is that not why you had me keep away yesterday? So he would not be terrified every waking minute by my presence? And you want me to *order* him to eat? Do you really think what he needs now are more *orders*?!”

He didn't even remember standing. Unable to suppress the growl in his voice, the god glared at his chief healer, slamming his hands down on the table as he leaned forward.

“I purposely kept his contract as simple as I could for this very reason. That boy has had too many orders, too many rules, too many restrictions in his life, and I *will not add to it* more than is strictly necessary! Am. I. **Clear.**”

“Perfectly.”

The damn woman was completely unfazed by his anger.

“However, while I see where you are coming from, you are mistaken in some aspects of your conclusions.”

Morax ground his teeth.

“Explain.”

“Xiao was not simply a prisoner, or a child of abuse. He was a *slave*, for how long? A decade? A century? Longer? Up until the death of his master, how long do you think it had been since he was last able to make a *choice*? A decision of any kind, much less about his own preferences, desires, well-being?”

He snorted, and looked away.

“Your point?”

“I know you have not interacted much with human slaves, my lord, beyond demanding they be freed where possible. But some things are consistent in their behavior once freed. Many of them - especially those who'd been that way longest, or in the worst situations - don't know how to handle freedom at first, no matter how desperately they wanted it. The rules they lived with, while generally terrible, told them how to survive, what to expect, what had a good result and what resulted in pain. They almost always need time and help to figure out how to live on their own again. The child...even as young as he is, he was likely a slave for longer than any mortal *could* be. Yes, he needs to learn how to make his own decisions, that it's okay to do things without being told to. But completely stripping away all of that from the start, leaving him with no direction and no hints he knows how to read with regards to what he should do...”

“Is like removing the ground from beneath his feet. I see.”

Morax let out a heavy sigh. He wanted desperately to completely change the boy's world

immediately, show him what life could be, *should* be for one such as him. To see the fear and uncertainty in those wide golden eyes replaced with the joy and wonder every child deserved. But he took Madame Ping's point, it would have to be slow, or it would overwhelm him, and maybe make things worse.

"How...how long will this process take?"

The healer's turn to sigh.

"That's up to him, mostly. I imagine getting his body in better shape will help his mind ease - that's part of why I so badly want to get him fed - but you have to be prepared, Morax. It could take a long time. Healing the mind and soul usually does."

The god rubbed at his temples. He seemed to have a constant headache, these last couple days.

"Alright. I will cooperate for now. But I want Xiao weaned off the notion that I am his... *master*... as soon as possible, understood? The notion is beyond repugnant."

"Of course, that was always my - "

Madame Ping's words were cut off as terrible screams reached them from down the hall. Adeptus and god were out of the kitchen in an instant, sprinting for Xiao's room. Morax's longer legs got him there first, and he slammed the door open to a nightmare.

Xiao was sitting bolt upright in the bed, his eyes were wide and unseeing, barely visible beneath hands that clawed at his forehead. The screams continued unabated, but for brief pauses to suck in air. Blood already coated his fingers and face, running down to drip onto his shoulders.

Morax didn't hesitate, quickly crossing the room and sitting behind the boy for leverage as he seized Xiao's hands and forced them away from his face. The child struggled with panicked strength, and the god was forced to hold onto his wrists with one hand each and hook a leg around the boy's middle to hold him in place, terrified he'd break something.

"Hold him there, try to reach him. I'll send for Bosacius."

Morax nodded distractedly, focusing on holding Xiao still without using so much strength he broke the boy's wrists. Where Xiao found such strength, as starved and depleted as he was, the god had no idea.

"It is alright, Xiao, you are safe here. Calm down, please...no one is going to hurt you...The contract, remember? I swore to protect you? There is no danger here, calm, calm..."

He struggled to keep his own voice calm, remembering what Madame Ping had told him after he'd raced for her help the previous morning. Was he struggling a little less?

"It is alright, child. I am not going to hurt you. I am restraining you because you were hurting yourself. I will let you go once I am certain you are not going to do so any further. Calm. Please, calm down. There is no reason to panic. You are safe here."

Thank the stars the boy hadn't activated his anemo powers in his panic.

"You are safe. There is no danger here. Please calm down. You are in your room at Madame Ping's, remember? No one here will hurt you. Please, please calm down."

There was a sound at the door, and Morax glanced up to see his top yaksha enter the room ahead of

Madame Ping, and gave him a pleading look. Bosacius gave him a nod, then moved forward cautiously to take Xiao's face in two hands and look into his eyes.

"I'm here, little whirlwind. You're safe now. Can you look at me? Feel my hands on your cheeks? Listen to my words and breathe, little whirlwind. Can you feel the blanket on your legs? That's real, that's here where you are. Breathe. Focus on my voice, on my hands, on the world around you. Breathe."

After a little, the screams stopped, though small, terrified sounds still kept coming from the little adeptus' throat, and now that his lungs weren't occupied with screams, he was starting to hyperventilate. His eyes grew more aware, but he didn't stop struggling, didn't stop reaching to claw at his own forehead, and the way his eyes moved around, it seemed he still didn't quite see his surroundings properly.

Morax closed his eyes for a moment, remembering the conversation that had been interrupted. Clearly, what Bosacius was doing wasn't enough....this was not going to be pleasant.

"Xiao."

He spoke firmly, a little sharply, with a hint of reprimand, and tried to ignore the way Bosacius' gaze snapped to him in shock.

"Stop fighting us. Now."

Those golden eyes stared directly up into his own for a long moment, and then the small body he was holding shuddered and went limp. Xiao stopped fighting, instead collapsing into quiet sobs. The moment it was clear he wouldn't hurt himself, Morax let him go, disentangling himself from around the child's waist. He *tried* to get off the bed, to give Xiao some space and leave the comforting to someone who could get away with it - namely, Bosacius - but the moment he tried to stand, his hip spasmed and he fell.

Damn it. He supposed it was his own fault for contorting like that. Madame Ping was going to lecture him when this was all over. He glanced up at Xiao, hoping he had not alarmed him further - and was surprised to see the boy looking back at him with less fear than previously. Tears still leaked from his eyes, but he'd already stopped sobbing, somehow.

"This...this one is sorry."

Morax blinked, looking up at Bosacius briefly where he was dabbing at the blood on Xiao's face with a damp cloth, then back down at the child.

"There is nothing you need to apologize for, Xiao. I am glad you were able to calm down."

Xiao looked down, causing the yaksha to sigh with frustration as he missed his target. Madame Ping stood behind Bosacius, ready with some antiseptic and bandages.

"This one lost control, and caused a mess, and caused trouble for Master Morax, and the mighty one, and the honorable one. I-is this not bad?"

The god threw a helpless glance at Madame Ping, who gestured for him to answer. He tried to shift to a slightly more comfortable position than how he'd landed, but his hip twinged in warning. He would have to stay put for now, it seemed.

"Losing control is not ideal, this is true. However, it seems to me you regained that control as soon as you were aware of the true situation, did you not?"

The boy hesitated, then nodded.

“Then you did what was within your ability to rectify the situation, and that is all I can ask for.”

Xiao looked puzzled by this, but did not argue. He twitched as Bosacius’ efforts got closer to the actual wounds, but did not pull away. When the large yaksha moved to allow Madame Ping access for the next step, though, the child glanced back up at Morax then away.

“The sleeping, and crying. Are these...not bad...as well?”

The child tensed as he asked the question, and Morax had to close his eyes for a moment. His heart hurt, and he didn’t know which he wanted more, to scoop the child up and protect him or track the body of Moharus down and rip it into a hundred pieces, in the hopes he’d still be able to feel it somehow. Neither reaction would help right now, he supposed...he took a deep breath and opened his eyes, speaking firmly in an attempt to quash all doubt.

“No. It is not wrong to sleep or cry. All beings need rest, and sometimes, crying is necessary as well, in order to process pain and emotions. You will *never* be punished for either, while you remain in lands under my control.”

That puzzled look again, but the boy nodded, and seemed to accept his words for now, at least. The god sighed with relief, and watched as Madame Ping bandaged Xiao’s head.

“As he says, little one, it is not wrong to cry. However, we would like to make it so that you *need* to cry less often, if we could. Would you be willing to tell us what scared you so badly?”

A moment’s silence, and an answer that was almost too quiet to hear.

“Th-this one had a bad dream.”

Well, clearly there was more to it than that. A mere ‘bad dream’ would hardly leave him screaming and clawing his own head bloody...would it? Morax looked to Madame Ping, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Would you tell us about it?”

Promptly Xiao started shaking, scrunching in on himself in a defensive fashion. Morax immediately regretted the question.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, Xiao.”

Xiao nodded, but added rocking back and forth to his shaking, not seeming to notice Bosacius rubbing his shoulder to soothe.

“I...I’ll get you some breakfast, shall I?”

Morax struggled to his feet, wincing. Xiao didn’t seem to notice, still rocking, and guilt stabbed at the god’s chest. He swallowed thickly, and limped quickly from the room.

He slammed his hands onto the edge of the counter as soon as he reached the kitchen, leaning forward on them and bowing his head as he struggled for control. He ignored the way his horns scraped on the cupboards. That wasn’t important right now.

He wasn’t *used* to this. This wasn’t how things went. Normally, when he took in those who had served a god he’d defeated, it was mostly handled by his adepts. He or one of his top yaksha would

handle the interrogation, make sure they were safe to bring in; he would personally work out the terms of a contract with them - though really, most of the contracts were virtually identical, within a category; and then the humans would go to the harbor, and any adepti so gained were welcomed by those already established. There were rarely all that many at once. Usually, when a god was defeated, the last place their followers wanted to go was to the one who'd defeated them. But it happened on a regular basis nonetheless, and there was a familiar process that he was used to.

Normally, the new followers didn't have a reputation as alarming as that of Alatus.

Never before had one been both an adeptus, and a *child*.

The first meant Morax had to keep a personal eye on him, he had known that from the start, even with the contract. He would never forgive himself if he'd misjudged the boy and his people paid the price. He had been prepared for the extra involvement from the moment he'd told Bosacius to carry him back here. He had not thought it would be much; occasionally stopping by to check on the boy, making certain to get regular reports from the adepti involved in his recovery. Morax had never been counted a particularly loving god; he cared for his people, of course, and wanted what was best for them, but it was from a distance, mostly. He was a warrior; while he led his people, he'd always felt his proper place was more that of a protector or guardian than anything else. It had always been Guizhong who...

He squeezed his eyes shut.

'It's been a thousand years. Why does your absence still hurt so much?'

In Guizhong's absence, he'd been forced to learn some of what she had done in leading their people, of course. He took audiences with his adepti, and had a standing invitation for the humans to approach him should they ever have a problem with said adepti, though they had yet to take him up on it. He met with his healers as well as his generals, he met with those in charge of supplying the town. He did his duty, but he did not let himself get too close, not since...there were some who knew him well, who had known *her*. Madame Ping. Bosacius. Cloud Retainer. A handful of others. And he could not help but feel a fondness for some of his devoted yaksha, the warriors he directed and fought beside. His generals, of course, that little spitfire Yanlais, the young Pervases.

But none of them affected him like *this*.

What was it? His youth, the vulnerability he tried so hard to hide? The way he took responsibility for his actions, despite clearly being terrified of the consequences? Perhaps it had been the fear in his eyes. Morax did not like having a child terrified of him. He desperately wanted to prove the boy didn't have to be. His mind replayed the way Xiao had *launched* himself away when Morax had tried to catch him, the shaking mess he'd been after. It was *wrong*. It needed to be *fixed*.

Maybe it was the way the young adeptus represented everything he was trying to protect his people from, both in what he had been forced to do, and in what he had been forced to endure.

"Are you alright, Morax?"

The god startled at the question. He hadn't heard Madame Ping come in. He realized that in his tension, his claws had carved out curls of wood from the counter, and grimaced.

"I am fine, as always, Madame Ping. The boy?"

She snorted.

"I know you better than that, old friend. Sit down before you do more damage to your hip.

Bosacius is working on calming Xiao down, and I have no doubt he will succeed, so how about we have that breakfast you promised ready when he does, hmm?"

Morax sighed and sat down as ordered.

"I don't know what to bring him..."

Madame Ping was already getting into the cryo box. She took out a small pot full of liquid and set it on the stove to warm.

"I know you don't, that's why I came after you. Some broth is all he's likely to tolerate right now."

The healer eyed him as she stirred the pot's contents.

"Since I know you won't let me check your hip, why don't you tell me what was so disturbing your mind that you tried to destroy my kitchen counter?"

He winced. She'd noticed, then.

"I will fix it later."

"That's not what I asked."

He huffed a little and glared. It had no effect on the aggravating woman; she simply raised an eyebrow at him. He looked away.

"I was trying to figure out how the child has such a grip on my heart."

Madame Ping smiled sadly.

"It's right there in your own words. He is a child. You like to pretend to be cold and distant, Morax, but Guizhong knew better, and so do your friends."

The broth began to simmer, and the healer left off stirring to sit at the table with her old friend, taking one of his hands in her own.

"You can try to protect yourself with walls around your heart, but it won't work. You have always cared too much to be able to hide that way. There was never any way that brave, frightened child would *not* have found a way in, once you spent any time around him. And that is not a bad thing, Morax. You and I, Bosacius and the others, we will all help him to recover and grow. And in return, he will help us to see the world anew, to remember what it is to have fun, and will heal hurts of our hearts and souls simply by existing. That is the way of children."

The broth began to boil in earnest, and Madame Ping patted his hand before she withdrew to pull it from the stovetop.

"Think on it, will you? I think a relationship between the two of you would do you both good."

Morax sighed.

"I will try."

"The broth is ready. Shall we go?"

The healer waited for him to stand, then handed him a mug of warm, translucent yellow liquid. He frowned.

“Are you certain about this? It does not seem appetizing...”

“I am. I doubt he can handle solids at all, and I suspect strong flavor would be a shock to his palate. This is warm and should feel comforting inside him, and has about as many nutrients as can be packed in such a thing.”

“You are the healer...”

He sniffed at the mug doubtfully, and grimaced. It was a poor substitute for a proper meal, but he trusted Madame Ping knew what she was doing. He headed back to Xiao’s room, doing his best to hide his limp. The hip *had* been tended to after the battle; one of the yakshas with healing abilities had dealt with the deep cut and his other minor wounds. It truly was fine. If he could just stop bashing it into things, contorting the joint to hold panicked children, falling on it...

On reaching the boy’s room, he was relieved to find the Xiao sitting fairly calmly on the bed, blanket around his shoulders, listening to...something Bosacious was saying. Something about a wind spirit in a rainstorm? He had no idea.

Xiao looked up almost instantly when he appeared in the doorway, staring at him for a brief moment before tucking his head submissively. Bosacious blinked at the boy, then looked up and smiled when he saw Morax.

“Ah! Is that his breakfast?”

“Indeed.” Morax stepped forward and passed the mug to the yaksha to hand to the boy. Xiao had reacted...better than expected...to his presence so far this morning, but he didn’t want to push it.

Unfortunately, it looked like the boy had no intention of drinking his broth. He just stared at it for a long moment, then looked to one side, away from both of them.

“This one does not require food.”

“Come now, little whirlwind, that’s not true. You’re a growing kid, your body needs nutrients to keep you healthy.”

“This one does not require food.”

“Xiao. Do you remember our contract?”

“...yes, master.”

Morax tried to cover a flinch. He really, *really* hated being called that, and all it implied.

“On my end, I am sworn to care for you and see you healed. Keeping you fed is part of that agreement.”

Silence. He sighed.

“Xiao, drink it.”

A moment’s hesitation, then...

“Yes, master.”

And the boy started to drink the broth.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I should have the next chapter up within a week, barring the unforeseen.

New Faces

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, all! Writing this chapter was like pulling teeth, I swear. Hopefully the next one will go smoother.

TW this chapter: social anxiety, mild panic, I think that's actually it? If I missed something, let me know in the comments, and I'll add the warning to this list.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Indarias tried to restrain the bounce in her step as she headed to Madame Ping's with Menogias and Bonanus. She knew it would come across wrong, the situation was so *sad*, but she was so excited to meet Xiao! The way Bosacius had described him late last night, he sounded *adorable*. And Bosacius was good with kids, and he'd given them all pointers last night. He'd warned them what not to do, how to not move suddenly or be too loud or try to touch him. As long as she remembered all that, surely she'd be able to cheer him up! She always knew how to light up a room, even Bonanus said so, and not sarcastically, either!

She'd been disappointed when young Ganyu came by to tell them the meeting was delayed. The flame-haired yaksha had been worried, at first, because Bosacius had been called away in a rush earlier, but the message had said that there had been an incident, but it was resolved and they just had to delay things a bit, until after lunch.

Indarias heard a sigh behind her, and turned to walk backwards for a bit, hands folded in the small of her back. Ah, of course. Bonanus.

"Don't worry, Bonanus! I'm sure he won't be bothered by your hands, I mean, he's a warrior, right? Even if he's just a child, he's seen battle, so why would he be scared of a little thing like that?"

Bonanus gave her a *look* and then slackened her pace to put Menogias between them. Indarias sighed and twirled around to face front again, skipping for a couple steps before remembering and switching to a more sedate pace.

"What do you think, Menogias? Doesn't he sound *adorable*?"

"I think if you act like this around him he's going to be terrified out of his wits."

Menogias gave her an even stare, his face relatively expressionless. Indarias loved how he tried to imitate Morax's unreadable expressions, it was so *cute*. She still wasn't sure if it was hero-worship or a crush, but she had her theories...

"Oh come on, you know I can be quiet! Have to be for ambushes and such. But I don't have to be until we get there, so..."

Indarias lifted her arms and spun a few times for the fun of it, hair flaring brightly. She was so happy - there weren't many kids among the adepti here at the harbor. Not any, really, unless you counted Ganyu and Pervases, and she didn't really get along with either of them very well, not like

she had with her little sister...she dodged away from that thought, brightening back up as she reminded herself this was a *happy* day. Hopefully the others hadn't noticed.

She remembered the look on Bosacius' face last night as he told them about Xiao. He was obviously worried about the kid, but every once in awhile the concern would be shoved aside by a fond smile on his face. He'd said that he'd gotten the kid to trust him somewhat, and not to worry if it took longer for them, but that smile when he thought back looked like more than *somewhat!* Indarias was looking forward to meeting this kid that had clearly won her brother over so quickly.

Lord Morax was waiting for them just inside the pass-through.

"It has been decided that it might be more prudent for all of you to meet Xiao in the open, where he might be less overwhelmed. If you will follow me, the others are waiting for us in the kitchen garden."

Bonanus nodded on hearing Morax's words. It made sense - inside, the boy might feel trapped, with nowhere to run. She followed as requested, trailing behind the others. She was still unsure how good an idea this was. The hydro yaksha stared at one oversized, clawed hand, pondering it for a moment before shoving it behind her back. It would likely be best to keep them out of sight as much as possible.

Indarias' words did not reassure her. The fact that Xiao was a warrior only meant that his reaction to a threat was more likely to be to attack, than to flee. If he responded in such a way, it might be difficult to fend him off without hurting him.

Entirely too soon, they had passed through the kitchen and through its door to the garden. Bonanus wondered in passing why two of the cupboards were now red, before recognizing that she was looking for distractions. Unlike her companions, she was not looking forward to this meeting. It was what her lord wanted, so she was here, she would do as requested...but she rather doubted Xiao would want her as an escort, or that she would be a calming influence if he had a panic attack. She would be more likely to *trigger* a panic attack. And...she was not looking forward to being violently rejected by yet another child.

Waiting on the far side of the kitchen garden, Madame Ping stood several feet to the side of Bosacius. A child, still quite young given that he barely came up to the electro yaksha's ribcage, stood very close to his side. He was every bit as bony and pale and bruised as Bosacius had said, and as nervous as she was, Bonanus' heart went out to the kid.

Menogias shot her a sympathetic glance as they approached the three, and moved forward so that he and Indarias would somewhat hide her from view. She appreciated it. Lord Morax stopped when their group was about twenty feet away from the boy - probably because that was the point at which Xiao had started to hunch into himself, as if to hide in his own shoulders.

"Xiao, along with Bosacius, these three are my most trusted yaksha. Bosacius, Indarias, Menogias, and Bonanus - "

Each of them nodded a greeting as their name was spoken.

” - are all to be considered my representatives per our contract. Do you understand?”

The boy gave a short nod.

“Yes, master. If I am to leave my permitted area, I must be accompanied by you or one of your representatives.”

Master? The hydro yaksha shot a quick glance at Morax, simultaneously kicking Indarias in the back of her ankle. The fiery girl had stiffened indignantly, and undoubtedly intended to say something, and it was unlikely to be helpful.

Morax, she noted, seemed resigned at the way the young adeptus addressed him, and a bit sad, but when he opened his mouth again it wasn't to object.

“Very well. I will leave you to get to know each other, then. Madame Ping, shall we?”

Bonanus ignored the glare Indarius shot at her, instead watching Xiao. During the short introductions, he'd made a couple abortive attempts to throw himself forward, and had been stopped by Bosacius' restraining hand on his shoulder. He didn't have the attitude of someone who wanted to attack, so she wondered what that was about. Awkward silence descended; it seemed that, for once, she was not the only one unsure how to start a conversation.

It was Bosacius who filled the void.

“Why don't we move to the benches, and you can tell us how your morning went? They'd be more comfortable than just standing around.”

Indarias practically bounced.

“What a great idea! Though there's not much to tell, really. I got up early to help with some of the beginners' training...”

Bonanus stopped paying attention to the pyro yaksha's chatter, instead continuing to keep an eye on the child. He had jumped when Indarias started talking - loudly, as was her usual - and now seemed glued to the side of Bosacius that was furthest from the other three yaksha. When they reached the benches, there was a bit of confusion. First, it seemed the boy had thought the seating was only for the rest of them, and it took some convincing from Bosacius to convince him it was alright for Xiao to sit there too. Then, there was a near disaster as Indarias made a beeline for the same bench. This time Menogias beat her to the punch in keeping their eager sibling in check; and a good thing, too, given the alarm and fear in the kid's eyes when the flame-haired girl got too close. Bonanus sat as far from him as she could. Once seated, hiding her hands was no longer possible, and if Xiao was afraid of *Indarias*....

When Indarias' enthusiastic description of her morning began to falter, Menogias took up the thread with his own morning in a much calmer voice. Bonanus was relieved to see Xiao slowly relax as her brother talked, though he still kept his eyes on the ground and stuck close to Bosacius.

Then it was her turn. Great. She *hated* talking about herself.

“My morning was rather boring, sorry. Just putting together reports from - “

Oops. Those had been the after-action reports from dealing with Moharus' domain. Information was still trickling in, and she'd spent much of the morning sorting it out into a sensible order to

send on to Morax, since the others were busy. But that...probably wasn't the best topic to bring up right now.

" - something - Anyway, how about you, Xiao? We heard something happened this morning, are you feeling better now?"

Silence. Oops. Maybe the reports would have been better after all.

She really wasn't good with kids...

"This one is sorry."

"Little whirlwind, we already told you, you didn't do anything wrong..."

"This one remembers. But this one's actions also interfered with these respected ones' plans. This lowly one knows it is wrong to disrupt the plans of others so much greater than oneself."

The kid was trembling...no, outright shaking. So was his voice. He sounded on the edge of tears... This was bad. She'd really messed up.

"No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up, we don't mind, really..."

Menogias and Indarias started to chime in with agreement, but they were all cut off as Xiao quite suddenly threw himself off the bench to prostrate himself in front of them. The back of his shirt was ripped wide, Bonanus noted absently, from just below the collar to his lower back. Bosacius had mentioned that, and told them not to say anything, to pretend they didn't see it if it came up - she wasn't about to mess up twice.

"Please forgive this lowly one. This one knows he deserves punishment for such an offense, but begs mercy."

His voice was so calm now, except for the tremble in it - he could've been reciting a recipe. She wondered if *she* would be able to keep her voice that even, if she were as terrified as he clearly was.

Menogias and Indarias were standing in front of their bench, rock-still in shock. Bosacius was trying to talk him into getting back up, trying to reassure him that everything was fine, but Xiao clearly wasn't listening. It occurred to her why, after a moment.

Xiao's...bow, if it could be called that...was aimed at the three whose mornings had been 'disrupted'. More at her than the others, actually, probably because she'd asked the question that started this. He wasn't listening to Bosacius because Bosacius wasn't who he feared punishment from. He needed to know from the three of them...from *her*... that he was forgiven.

This was...wrong.

She didn't know how to fix it.

But she had to try.

If she had offended three powerful beings, and was injured and helpless, and afraid they'd hurt her for it, what would set her at ease?

Slowly, slowly, Bonanus got down onto the grass, down to the boy's level, or as close as she could get. She moved closer, but not too close, on all fours, and lowered her face to peer at his until her cheek was lying on the grass and she could just barely see one side of the kid's face. The eye she

could see was squeezed shut.

Behind her, she heard Indarias start to say something, and Menogias shush her. She realized Bosacius had stopped talking, too, though he still hovered close by.

Great. Apparently the consensus was that it was all on her, now.

Well, she'd already kind of come to that conclusion herself...

It was still annoying, though.

Back to the task at hand.

"Xiao?"

She spoke as softly and kindly as she could, but the kid still jumped. That eye snapped open, staring sideways at her. It was the first time she'd actually seen one of his eyes, they'd been so focused on the ground...well, hers had been too, to be fair. Nerves would do that. It was a beautiful gold color, paler than the warm gold-amber of Morax's eyes.

"Xiao, I promise we're not upset. We were just worried about you."

"This one is sorry for making you worry..."

"That's not something to be sorry for. If someone worries about you, that means they care about you, and that's not something you ever have to apologize for, okay?"

He was still tense, and seemed confused.

"This one does not understand."

This was fast getting out of her depth. She was *not* the right person to try to explain emotions and affection. It usually didn't make much sense to her either.

"I'm not sure I do either. But if it's forgiveness you need, you have it, okay kiddo? We're certainly not going to punish you."

Xiao still looked confused, but he'd started to turn his face to look at hers. He wasn't shaking as much. Maybe that was progress? At least he hadn't run away, or screamed. She'd count that a huge success, with her history, except she wasn't sure if it was because she'd done something right or because the kid just had that much courage.

There was a long pause, and Bonanus tried to think of what else to say. To her surprise, Xiao spoke first.

"Why does gentle one have her face to the ground?"

Gentle one? Where in Celestia had he gotten *that*? Bonanus was pretty sure no one had *ever* described her as gentle. Ever. In her life. Sarcastic, biting, scary, terrifying, sure. Those few who knew her better sometimes called her quiet. But *gentle*?

Not the time to argue.

"How else was I to look you in the face while we talked, given your own position? And how would you know if I was sincere if you couldn't see my face?"

“This one is sorry for inconveniencing - “

“Nah, this is actually surprisingly comfortable, kiddo.”

Bonanus promptly spread out to lie on the grass properly, folding her arms under her face, still turned towards Xiao.

“Besides, it’s awkward to talk to someone who puts their head so far below my own. I think I’ll join you like this every time you do that weird bowing thing.”

The young adeptus was clearly more confused than frightened, now. He slowly started to sit up, then his eyes flicked to Menogias and Indarias and he froze. Bonanus threw a quick glare at them, and apparently it clicked.

“Ah...you’re forgiven, Xiao. Nothing to forgive, really.”

“No need to be sorry! It just meant I had more time to do my stretches properly!”

Bosacius moved over and sat on the grass beside the two of them, as the other two yaksha sat back on their bench.

“You see, little whirlwind? They wouldn’t hurt you any more than I would. You are safe here.”

Xiao slowly sat the rest of the way up and nodded, his eyes back to his knees. Bonanus waited to be sure he was *staying* sitting up, then sat up herself, sitting crosslegged in the grass like her brother. After another moment, Bosacius started up the conversation again.

“So, Indarias, any of those new recruits you’re training look promising?”

“None ready to toss your way yet! There’s a couple who might get there soon - “

Bonanus tuned out the conversation after a moment, in favor of keeping an unobtrusive eye on the kid. At least he seemed more relaxed now, or at least he did once it became clear that the others were talking around him instead of *to* him.

After awhile, it occurred to her that her hands had been not just in plain view, but in reach of Xiao’s face, for a good few minutes - and he hadn’t reacted at all.

A small smile grew on the hydro yaksha’s face.

Xiao...wasn’t sure *what* to make of these new great ones. Bosacius had prevented him from showing the proper submission when they’d been introduced, and he’d been sure that would have repercussions, but none of them seemed to have noticed. Once Master Morax had left with the honorable one, they had moved to the benches, and Bosacius had persuaded him that it was alright, at least for now, to sit like one of them. Then the four yaksha had chatted about their morning, occasionally seeming to direct a comment at Xiao, and he’d nodded. That seemed to be all they wanted; they kept on talking.

The bright one was the scariest. She was always moving, and loud, and unpredictable. He couldn't be sure from moment to moment whether she was just shifting position or preparing to strike.

The solid one seemed calmer, but Xiao couldn't get a read on him, and that made him nervous. He seemed almost as closed-in as Master Morax, leaving Xiao with few clues as to what he was thinking.

The last...for the longest time, Xiao didn't know what to make of her either. Then she brought up his failure that morning, and he'd tried to apologize, and she had *gotten down on the ground* with him. Acted like she was as low as he was, forgave him, talked to him as an equal. She made no sense, but she seemed kind, like Madame Ping, but different...

He still wasn't sure he could trust any of them. He had yet to be punished, and it made his back itch, sure that something was coming for him, that it was just waiting for him to let down his guard.

Once Xiao was sitting upright again, they all started talking again, but this time they didn't include him. He was glad. It was a strain, trying to figure out what they expected, with so few rules to follow. They seemed to have a lot to talk about...he didn't listen, beyond keeping an ear out in case they said something to him. He absently picked at the grass next to his leg as the hours passed, trying to ignore the way he kept feeling dizzy. That didn't make sense either, it wasn't like he was moving much...

The sun was getting low in the too-close sky when he felt Madame Ping's presence coming their way.

"I'm glad to see you all getting on so well, but I'm afraid it's getting a bit late. It's time to tend to the little one's wounds, and I imagine the rest of you are starting to feel the need for some dinner. Bosacius, would you be willing to stay long enough to help?"

"Of course, Madame Ping. You hardly need to ask."

The solid one and the gentle one got up to leave, thanking Madame Ping, but they moved normally. Xiao couldn't help but jump and stare wide-eyed as the bright one practically leapt up from the bench, moving quickly towards Xiao, hair flaring bright...

Fire...pyro wielder coming closer, burning, pain...

It took only a moment to realize that she was moving towards the mighty one, not *him*, but by then the young adeptus had already begun to react on instinct, jumping back and teleporting out of reach

-

-except he didn't teleport.

Anemo swirled halfheartedly and fell away as he fell on his back, breathing hard and heart racing. He tried to get back up again but his limbs barely moved.

"Xiao!"

The bright one moved towards him, but the mighty one stood in her way, arms out, saying something while the honorable one's presence came closer, far more quickly than normal. Or was it his sense of time that was abnormal? Panic made his heart beat even harder and faster, like it was trying to leap out of his chest.

He couldn't breathe.

Voices all around him, high with tension and something else. He couldn't understand the words.

Darkness began to haze Xiao's vision, tunneling in to focus on the mighty one's back, arms still spread wide to protect him. Something about it seemed familiar...niggled at his memory...then it all went black.

Chapter End Notes

Sleep deep, dream well!

Energies and Guilt

Chapter Notes

TW for this chapter: flashbacks, risky medical decisions, guilt trips, slavery, implied torture. As always, if I missed one, let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It all happened so fast. The gathering was breaking up naturally with only a little prompting, all seemed to be going well - then Indarias had moved a little too quickly in just the wrong direction, and that was enough to set in chain everything else.

Madame Ping saw Xiao leap back and try to do - something - with his power, which evidently failed. Bosacius had quickly moved between the two, fending off the now-alarmed Indarias and the others, telling them to keep back and give Xiao space. As the attempted swirl of anemo faded, she saw the child topple over and then she was already sprinting to his side.

As soon as Madame Ping got close, she had a horrified suspicion what was wrong. The young adeptus' presence had been faint from the start, with how low his adeptal energy was - now his presence flickered at the edge of her senses, guttering like a candle about to go out.

This made no sense. Even in the worst shape, adepti *generated* adeptal energy. He should have been slowly recovering it, not losing still more...

The boy passed out even as she knelt at his side. There was no time. He wouldn't be able to withstand a reading, she would have to assume her guess was correct, no matter whether it made sense. She moved a hand to his forehead, glowing with just the slightest hint of her power. Gently, she sent the smallest trickle she could manage into the boy's body - not doing anything with it, just adding to what he had naturally.

This was...not recommended procedure. An adeptus short on adeptal energy could not handle more energy in their body very well. Normally, the best solution was to make sure the patient ate well and rested as much as possible, letting them regain their strength naturally. If there was a reason they could not wait - impending attack, for instance - they could be supplemented from outside, but it was avoided if at all possible. It was risky. Even when it worked, there were often complications.

But the healer didn't see another way. Somehow, Xiao's energy was still draining, and *he would die* if it got much lower.

So Madame Ping tried to supplement his energy with her own, without overwhelming his body.

It wasn't going well.

His presence would stabilize for a moment, then his heart rate would leap up and he would have trouble breathing again. She would pull back, and he'd resume fading. She'd send that trickle in again, and for a few minutes it would seem to work...then the whole cycle would begin anew.

A dark hand gleaming with golden markings moved into Madame Ping's field of view, and she slapped it away with her free hand.

“Don’t even think of it, Morax. You would burn him out in a heartbeat. Even *I’m* too powerful for this...”

She was crying. When had she started crying? But it was true. She was not a particularly powerful adeptus, her strength was in her skill. She had never thought she’d be *too* powerful for anything. But that was exactly the problem. If she were any stronger, or any less skilled at fine control, Xiao would already be dead. He *would* be dead if she lost focus, lost even a little control. Or if she stopped.

How had she not noticed this sooner? He’d been in her care long enough. She should’ve realized he was getting weaker, not stronger. If she hadn’t blindly assumed that his shaking was just due to fear, if she’d paid more attention, she might’ve figured it out sooner. While he was still strong enough to accept a stronger, continuous stream of energy.

“If I can not lend my power directly, is there anything else I can do?”

Morax’s voice sounded strained, desperate.

Madame Ping’s mind raced, as she frantically tried to think of a solution without losing her focus. Pervases was young...but no, even so, he was already as strong as her, and less controlled. Who else? Of course. Ganyu. She’d always been good at control, and she was half-blooded, so her natural power should be weaker than other adepti at her stage of development. Anemo would be better, like to like, but they didn’t have any *options*...

“Ganyu. Send for Ganyu. She might be able to do this better, and I can’t think of anyone else...”

“Understood.”

Morax’s presence moved away, and Madame Ping let herself slip into a trance, letting everything fade away except the flickering presence before her and her so-careful flow of power.

Time passed. She wasn’t sure how much. The cycle was almost soothing, in her trance, like breathing...let out a trickle of power, wait, pull back...

At some point she dimly felt Bosacius moving around them, and realized he was putting a blanket over Xiao’s body, then another over her own shoulders. She didn’t dare break focus to thank him.

...out, wait, back...

...out, wait, back...

...out, wait, back...

Footsteps running closer, the presence of a cryo wielder. Ganyu. Madame Ping slowly pulled herself out of the trance, registering cramped muscles and an aching back. It had been awhile, apparently.

“Morax said that the new adeptus collapsed, and you needed me, but I’m not a healer, I don’t know what you could possibly need me for - “

“Calm down, child.”

Madame Ping sighed, and struggled to keep the cycle going, now that her focus was split. She had to keep going, at least until Ganyu got started, and she had to calm the girl down before that, or her control would suffer.

“You don’t need to be a healer for this. I requested you because you have good control over your powers, and because you are still young enough that your power won’t overwhelm him. Come, sit opposite me.”

Ganyu hesitated, then dropped into place on the other side of Xiao.

“Young Xiao’s adeptal energy is far too low, and is somehow being drained away. We need to find the cause, but before we can do that, we must supplement his energy to the point where we can do a reading. Too much power now will kill him.”

She looked up briefly, making eye contact with the girl. Ganyu wasn’t flighty, for a child, but she needed to know the stakes. If she allowed herself to be distracted too soon, their efforts would amount to nothing.

Ganyu swallowed hard, and nodded.

“Right now, his energy is so low that even I am too powerful to help him effectively. My *hope* is that you, being able to manipulate energy in smaller amounts, will be able to get him back to the point where he can accept a steady flow from myself or another. From there we will no longer need your help.”

Another nod.

“Alright, watch my hand, sense what I am doing. You want to send a steady flow, as small as you can manage but *stable*, into his body. Do not manipulate it in any way, just offer it up to join with his own. If he begins to have trouble breathing, pull back until his breathing steadies again.”

No point telling the girl to watch his heartrate; she didn’t have the training.

“Hopefully, with a small enough trickle of power, you won’t need to pull back. I’ll stay here to guide you, and to let you know when it’s safe to increase the flow. Do you understand what you are to do?”

“I think so.”

Ganyu didn’t sound very sure.

“How about you try it out on me? I will come to no harm from it.”

Well, technically she might, if there were complications. But it was unlikely with so little power used, and it was safer to test the girl’s control on herself than on a patient who was already straddling death’s door.

“Alright...”

The young half-qilin reached out her hand to the one Madame Ping extended, and the healer felt a nice, steady flow, about half what she was sending Xiao, enter her system. She waited a few moments to make sure Ganyu wasn’t going to let the flow waver or surge, then nodded and pulled back.

“Very good. I’m going to pull back, then you take my place and begin.

Ganyu nodded and leaned forward, and the hand-off was accomplished smoothly. Madame Ping waited, watching with her heart in mouth.

The time when she would've been forced to pull back came, and went, with no increase in the boy's heartrate. She gave a sigh of relief, then settled in to wait. It was going to be a long evening.

Morax sat still as stone at the kitchen table, holding a cup of tea that had long since gone cold. It had taken far longer than he had anticipated to locate Ganyu; he hoped it hadn't been *too* long. And now he had nothing he could do but wait.

This was all his fault.

If he had only told Madame Ping about the dead adepti his yaksha had found, if he had been less concerned with her peace of mind and more concerned about what it might mean for Xiao, maybe they would have caught this before the boy deteriorated so far.

No, not maybe. He had no doubt the healer would have put it together in no time at all, with access to all the information.

The cup creaked between his hands, and the god forced himself to loosen his grip before it shattered.

He wondered why his magic wasn't punishing him yet. Perhaps it did not consider this a breach of contract; technically, this was a pre-existing condition, so was not a failure of his protection, and he was not sure at what point he would be considered to have failed to 'see him healed'. That was the problem with simple contracts; there was often a lot of wiggle room. Probably that line of the contract would not be considered breached unless he actively denied Xiao access to healing, or the child died for the lack of it.

Morax supposed he should consider himself lucky his magic wasn't coming after him for a breach yet. He thought he might feel better if it did, though. He certainly *felt* like he'd failed.

Darkness had fallen some time ago. The god stared at the cup in his hands, not really seeing it. Was it a good thing that they were still out there, or did it mean things were going wrong? Or even that the boy wasn't improving? The memory of how Xiao had looked on the ground, so still, so pale - not even pale, almost *gray* - tore through his mind, and Morax shuddered. He longed to go out there, to see for himself, but he knew distracting Madame Ping and Ganyu with his presence would be not at all helpful.

The god's head jerked up as there was a sound at the door, and then it opened. Bosacius stepped in, carefully carrying a still-unconscious Xiao in his left arms and Ganyu, still with her hand to Xiao's forehead, in his right. Madame Ping followed after, watching carefully. Morax started to stand, then slowly sat back down as Madame Ping shook her head and gestured for him to wait.

Not a word was spoken as the four crossed the kitchen and headed down the hall, presumably to the boy's room. Morax waited, so tense he wondered if his shoulders were trying to turn into literal stone. After a long few minutes, Bosacius returned.

"He's stable, for now. Ganyu's still maintaining the flow, and Madame Ping's staying to guide

her.”

“What happened, do you know?”

The god winced as his voice cracked. Apparently it wasn't just his back tensed up.

“From what Madame Ping told Ganyu, she doesn't know what's causing it yet, but something's draining Xiao's adeptal energy...he collapsed because he almost ran out entirely.”

Morax was startled to realize his marshal was shaking, all four hands gripping each other so tightly his knuckles showed white. He hesitated, then pulled out one of the other chairs, gesturing for the yaksha to sit. Bosacius practically fell into the seat.

“Ganyu's been able to maintain a slow enough trickle of his power that his body's able to handle it, and Madame Ping seems to think he's doing better, but I don't see it. He still looks the same, and I can barely sense him at all...”

Bosacius loosed two of his hands to scrub at his hair, then stopped, just holding his head for a moment.

“It sounds like they're trying to get him to the point where someone else can...feed him energy, I guess. I don't know what the plan is after that.”

Morax nodded, and stared at the table. He hated this...waiting. He felt helpless, and the god was not used to the feeling.

It reminded him of when Guizhong...

Without thinking, he downed the cup of tea, spluttering as the cold, stale liquid went down his throat. The god coughed and wiped his mouth. He looked up, thinking to find a cloth to clean up the unintentional spray, and met the concerned eyes of Bosacius. He looked away, found the cloth, and cleaned up.

“Are you alright, Morax?”

“I am fine. I am simply worried, as you are.”

The yaksha didn't look like he believed him, but didn't press the issue.

Awkward silence descended, but neither of them made any effort to break it. It didn't really feel...right...to make small talk under the circumstances.

Time passed slowly in the kitchen. Bosacius scrubbed at his hair and rested his forehead in two hands, elbows propped on the table. He could tell Morax was more upset about this than he was admitting to, and on the one hand it had him worried for his lord and friend, but on another it made him glad that his god cared so deeply for his little whirlwind. He thought it would be good for them both - if the kid lived.

The need to qualify the thought with that possibility twisted like a knife in his gut.

When he'd first carried Xiao away from Moharus' domain, the kid had been undeniably in bad shape, but Bosacius had been certain it was nothing that couldn't be fixed once he was in a healer's care, at least physically. Damage to the mind and soul was always less predictable, but he'd been fairly sure the kid could recover there too, given time and help and support. Finding out that assumption might've been wrong *hurt*.

It hurt even more to know Xiao's sudden collapse was probably at least partly his fault.

He was the only one involved who had seen Xiao in battle. He'd *known* the kid used his power constantly, teleporting around his opponents, swirling in his own anemo to strike and dodge with incredible speed. It was the whole reason he'd started calling the kid a little whirlwind. So why had he thought nothing of it when the kid stopped using his power entirely, once he was here? It should have been a huge red flag. He should have brought it up with Madame Ping after that first afternoon. He should have...

And then there was the trigger of the whole incident. Technically, Indarias was under his command, for all they ignored that most of the time. And even if he didn't factor that in, he *was* the one responsible for making sure his siblings knew what not to do around Xiao. He *knew* his sister, *knew* how energetic she was, *knew* how hard it was for her to sit still for any length of time. So why hadn't he worked harder to impress on her just how important it was not to startle the little whirlwind, and how easy it was to do? Why had he thought one conversation with the whole group would be sufficient? Especially after this morning, he *knew* the kid would undoubtedly be even more jumpy all day after whatever that nightmare was.

Glancing at the window, the yaksha threw his head back and groaned softly in frustration. It felt like they'd been waiting days, but the sun hadn't even risen yet. He snuck a look at Morax, and wondered if the god even realized the teacup he was gripping again was not just empty, but cracked.

Time passed as Bosacius marinated in guilt and misery. After awhile, the smallest things started seizing his attention.

When had two of the cupboards been turned red? Those were the ones with the medicines, right?

The teapot was still out. Undoubtedly stale and cold, now. Not that tea was really his thing.

The floor needed swept. It looked like days' worth of dirt was tracked between the door and hallway. Made sense, he supposed, Madame Ping had been rather occupied of late.

He should probably get up and do the sweeping for her. It was the least he could do.

After entirely too long a moment pondering the notion, Bosacius got up and retrieved the broom. He'd barely started sweeping when he heard a chair clatter to the floor, and turned to see Morax on his feet - and a very tired Madame Ping standing at the arch into the hall. He gripped the broom tightly for a moment, then gently set it in the corner.

Morax spoke first, in such a choked voice that Bosacius was worried for a moment.

"Is he alright?"

"That is not the word I'd use...but yes, he has improved significantly. I sent Ganyu home a couple hours ago, and have been supplementing his energy in steadily higher amounts since she left."

The healer sighed, and slowly sat in one of the remaining chairs.

“His adeptal energy levels are now higher than they were when I treated him just after your contract - “

She nodded at Morax, and both god and yaksha sighed in relief before she continued.

” - but I don’t know how long that will last. Xiao is still unconscious, and I have no way of knowing at this time whether whatever’s draining him does so at a consistent rate.”

That was...worrying. But Bosacius reminded himself that Madame Ping would not have left her patient if she believed him in immediate danger.

“So what now?”

Madame Ping gave him a tired look.

“Now, we try to keep him from draining too far, and until we’ve solved the root problem, we try to get and *keep* his adeptal energies as high as we can, in case there is a sudden change. I believe I have gotten him to the point where you can just barely help him, Bosacius - those of us he is most used to are going to have to take this in shifts, I think. I’ll show you how.”

Morax shifted, and opened his mouth, but the healer didn’t give him a chance to speak.

“No, Morax, you cannot feed him your energies yet. You are too powerful, and while you are skilled with that power, there is a limit to how thin you can thread it.”

The god looked like he wanted to argue, but didn’t.

“Can I at least watch over him?”

Madame Ping sighed.

“Yes. He seems less alarmed by your presence than he was at first, and at any rate he’s too deeply unconscious to sense anything right now, I think. It would also be useful for you to be there when I show Bosacius the technique we will be using, so that when he *does* improve to the point where you can take a turn, you know what to do.”

Morax sighed with relief, and Bosacius nodded. He was glad there was something he could do to help his little whirlwind, and he wasn’t going to let his exhaustion get in the way. It wasn’t like he would be able to sleep right now anyway.

Apparently, Madame Ping wasn’t done talking though.

“Both of you need to remember that this is *not* a method that should normally be used. If the circumstances weren’t so dire, or if I could think of *any* other way to keep the boy alive, we would not be doing this. Our bodies and pathways are not built to use another’s power to such an extent, and complications in those treated this way are incredibly common, though the risks can be reduced by keeping the flow of energy as smooth as possible. Anything from a dangerous fever as the body attempts to reject the foreign energy, to those pathways becoming so warped the patient can never use their own powers again. What we are doing is *incredibly* risky, and you should *never* use it on another person except under the direction of a skilled healer. Understood?”

She looked each of them directly in the eyes as she spoke, and Bosacius swallowed hard as he nodded. He would be very, very careful...the thought of his little whirlwind never being able to -

well, be a whirlwind - again, hurt.

After a moment, Madame Ping sighed and stood back up.

“It’s only a couple more hours until dawn, I think. Bosacius, do you think you can last that long, and keep focus? I’ll need at least a nap before I can do more, myself.”

“I’ve stayed clearheaded when awake for longer. Battles don’t wait for sleep. And...I think he might have made a connection with Bonanus at least, today. She might be able to take a shift.”

Madame Ping’s relief was obvious.

“Good. I hope you’re right. This will be much easier if we have three people for the first few days, instead of two. I’ll send for her in the morning.”

She led them down the hall to Xiao’s room, and demonstrating the technique. Bosacius watched carefully, even though he was pretty sure he had it figured out from watching earlier - he was *not* going to mess this up - and then she watched him for the first bit while Morax quietly moved the chair to the far side of the room before sitting in it.

‘Good. Xiao might not react as strongly to him anymore, but I bet when he wakes up he notices that there’s a god in the room before he realizes which god.’

He kept the flow to the smallest trickle he could keep steady, and settled in for a long couple hours.

About halfway through, he looked up and realized Morax had fallen asleep in that chair, and couldn’t help a smirk. Yes, the god had every reason to be tired these days, but he always tried so hard to hide it from everyone...

It wasn’t until the first hint of dawn began to brighten the room that Bosacius realized Xiao was crying.

The memories were disjointed at first, flashes of disconnected moments fuzzily blurring past.

A huge and muscular man, human, leaning over him. “What are you doing here, kid? Why would he bother taking someone so small as you?”

The same man, blocking the blow as Master moved to strike at Alatus, and paying the price for interfering in the punishment.

The man, now covered in scars and fresh whip marks, trying to get Alatus to eat. “This one does not require food, mighty one.”

Then the swirling stopped, and the young adeptus remembered.

“Stop! Please! You can’t lend him out to that...that monster! He’s just a kid!”

*“Who are **you** to presume to tell **Me** what I can do with My own things?”*

Alatus cowered behind the mighty one’s legs. He didn’t know why the man cared, but he’d turned white when he’d heard Alatus’ next assignment, and said he wasn’t going to let it happen. He knew many of the others were more scared of Master’s ally than they were of Master, but no one ever told him why, and he couldn’t imagine how any other god could be worse than his own. And mighty one knew what Master did when he was mad. Why was he risking it?

*“Do you want your ‘things’ to **break** ? If you send him there, the husk you get back will be useless for anything after that!”*

“Your concern for my things is...touching.”

Moharus laughed, and peeking between his fingers, Alatus saw the sort of smile on Master’s face that always meant the worst was coming. He couldn’t help whimpering.

“What if I no longer care if this particular tool breaks? What will you do then, to dissuade Me, powerless as you are? I owe Sinaria a gift, after all.”

“Send me in his place.”

Alatus’ head jerked up. No, whatever it was, he’d do it...mighty one was the only one who’d ever cared, who’d ever protected him. Alatus didn’t want him hurt. Alatus didn’t want him gone. Even if it meant...He tugged on mighty one’s pant leg, trying to tell him without words to stop, to let it go, that it wasn’t worth it. He wasn’t worth it. But the mighty one ignored him.

“Send me. Surely she’ll have more fun breaking a strong warrior than a child who is already half broken.”

More of that dark laughter.

“This amuses Me! I get rid of a problem slave, and entertain My ally. You get what you think you want, and learn the hard way that you were wrong. Very well. You shall go, and I shall find another use for My things. It has been some time since I last toyed with its wings...”

Alatus’ next few hours were full of pain and screaming, the crack of bone and the sizzle of electrified flesh. It was extremely painful, as he knew it would be, but not as painful as the fact that he never saw the mighty one again.

“Shh, shh, you’re safe little whirlwind, it’s just a dream, you’re safe...”

Bosacius bit his lip. He couldn’t keep the flow perfectly steady and focus on trying to reassure the kid. Not that he was sure his words were even getting through. Xiao hadn’t moved, hadn’t made a

sound, there was only the steady flow of tears.

“Morax...My lord, wake up...”

The god snorted and snapped to attention in the chair, blinking several times before he focused on Bosacius.

“I am sorry, I did not mean to sleep. Is something wrong?”

Morax frowned and started to stand, now looking worriedly at Xiao.

“Nothing unexpected, if I thought about it. I think...I think Xiao’s starting to have another nightmare, but I can’t maintain the flow *and* try to soothe him out of it. Could you get Madame Ping?”

He made sure to speak softly and calmly, in case the tone at least was getting through to the kid. No need to make the nightmare worse, if that’s what it was. He didn’t want to think about what else could make him weep while in this state.

Morax nodded and swiftly left the room. The yaksha turned his full focus back to the flow, making sure it didn’t waver.

”...mighty one...this one is sorry...please don’t leave...please...”

It was the barest whisper, but it was still colored with pain and desperation. Bosacius closed his eyes for a moment.

“I’m right here, little whirlwind. I’m not going to leave.”

”...please...don’t hurt him, send this one...this one is the one who is bad...don’t send him away...”

What was he dreaming? Or remembering...Bosacius swallowed hard. He had no reason to think he was the first person Xiao had called ‘mighty one’, really. It was possible that was what he called anyone big and muscular.

The young adeptus was starting to move, shaking his head in negation of something, trembling the way he so often did. He was clearly moving closer to consciousness...and the nightmare seemed to be getting worse.

Madame Ping showed up just as he was wrestling with the idea of abandoning the flow in favor of waking the little whirlwind before he hurt himself. He wasn’t moving that much yet, but he remembered the previous morning, and didn’t want to see a repeat, so he was relieved when she hurried to the bed and took over from him.

Freed from that task, Bosacius focused wholly on the child. Just in time, it seemed.

“ **Please!** Don’t send him...bring him back...whatever this one did, this one is sorry!”

Xiao began thrashing, and the yaksha had to use all four arms to hold him still.

“I’m right here, little whirlwind. You’re safe, and I’m not going anywhere. No one is sending me away. It’s just a dream, a nightmare, just open your eyes and wake up...”

He knew his words weren’t getting through.

He was starting to wonder if the shock to Xiao’s system from a sudden icebath would be worse

than letting the nightmare continue when the screams started. That answered that question.

“Morax!”

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to speculate in the comments, I enjoy seeing people's theories! It will not affect my plans for the story in the slightest, unless you accidentally reveal a plot hole I missed, in which case I will find a way to try to fill it.

Sleep deep, dream well!

Withdrawal and Guilt

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry for this chapter.

TW - panic attack, perceived betrayal, guilt, implied self-hatred

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiao snapped awake in shock. For a long moment he didn't know what had happened, why he was asleep, why he woke up, where he was...then he remembered sleeping was bad, and felt the god in the room, and felt the restraining hands all over his body...

"This one is sorry! This one didn't mean to..."

Then more memory returned, and he realized the god was Master Morax, not Master Moharus, and Master Morax had said sleeping wasn't bad. But if it wasn't bad, why was he being held down? Hands, not restraints, but it was the same thing...power burned at his forehead, and it was hard to think...

It was the mighty one holding him down. Was electro to be used to punish him, after all?

What had he done? Nothing had resulted in punishment here before, and he didn't remember breaking any of the rules. Or was it as he feared, and they were just waiting, letting him think he was safe? Were they showing their true colors now? Tears blurred his vision so that he could barely see as he stared up at the mighty one above him.

"Why? You said sleeping wasn't bad. What did this one do wrong?"

He was shaking, and not just from fear. He was cold, and wet. Xiao swallowed as he recognized one of Master Moharus' favorite setups for punishment. First the cryo, and the hydro, then the electro...

"P-please...please don't hurt this one...What did this one do wrong? Whatever it is, this one can fix it...p-please...p-please don't hurt me..."

Xiao squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them after a few moments when nothing happened. His vision was a little clearer now, and he realized the mighty one's mouth was moving. Slowly he realized he was surrounded by noise, and had been since he woke up. The restraining hands let go, one of them moving to rub his right shoulder, and slowly the words came into focus.

"...not going to hurt you, little whirlwind. I would never hurt you. I was only holding you down because you were thrashing, and you need to hold still. I'm not going to hurt you, you're safe here. You haven't done anything wrong, little whirlwind. You're safe."

Was...was the mighty one *crying*? Why was he crying? If Xiao wasn't to be punished, if mighty one was still *safe*, like the other mighty one that he'd tried so hard to forget long ago, because remembering *hurt*, then why would mighty one be upset...unless it wasn't really safe. Unless there was something else wrong.

Xiao started to shake harder.

“Please calm down, little one. Your shaking is making it hard to keep the flow steady.”

He reflexively tried to jerk away from the unexpected voice, but hands restrained him even before he realized it was the honorable one. The healer, who Master Morax had set to tending his wounds. But why was she here now? What flow...ah. The burn of power on his forehead. But why? It hurt, it wasn't anywhere he was injured, was this a punishment? Punishments usually hurt more than this, but it could be leading to something...

“Hurts. Why? What did this one *do*?”

He was scared. None of what was happening was what he'd been led to expect here. Mighty one had been holding him down, and honorable one was hurting him, and they'd all *said* they'd never hurt him, but apparently they *lied*, so he couldn't *trust* them, and if he couldn't trust them and the rules weren't stated how could he know what to do to avoid being *punished*, how could he know what was *bad* ...

Xiao's breath hitched in a sob, and he tried to suppress it, because if they'd lied about hurting him, maybe crying really *was* still bad...

The voices were fading in and out again, and it was getting harder still to figure out what was going on around him. That made things worse, because if he couldn't tell where anyone was, how could he know when someone was getting ready to hit him, or...

Suddenly Master Morax's presence was very close, and he tried to cringe away, but the hands stopped him, and then the cold and wet on him was pulled away and something warm and dry was put in its place, and he realized it was a blanket. Then the power that *hurt* pulled back and the pain in his head stopped burning and started throbbing and everything was still spinning and suddenly there were *hands* holding his face...

Snap. Snap. Snap.

There were fingers in front of his face. He focused on them instinctively, and watched as they pulled back to drop away in front of the mighty one's face. Green eyes stared into gold, and Xiao felt the world around him start to settle.

“Focus, little whirlwind. Listen to the sound of my voice. Feel my hands on your face, the bed beneath your own hands. Breathe with me. In two three, out two three...”

Bosacius breathed a sigh of relief as Xiao's breathing finally started to slow down and as his eyes grew more focused and aware. The little whirlwind was still shaking, and obviously terrified, but at least the blind panic seemed to be fading. He wanted so badly to hug the kid, to hold him tight and not let go, but he knew very well that trying to would almost certainly start the panic attack up again.

So he settled for rubbing Xiao's right shoulder, which had worked well the last couple days.

Except now the boy tried to flinch away from even that, and his heart cracked. Evidently, something either in the nightmare or in the way he'd woken up had broken the fragile trust they'd developed.

With a sigh, Bosacius leaned back, removing his hands from the little whirlwind's face. The kid seemed to be grounded now, and it was clear his touch wasn't welcome.

"Can you hear me now, little whirlwind?"

A pause, and a short nod, golden eyes now focused on little knees.

"Can you tell me what's scaring you?"

Xiao seemed to shrink into his shoulders for a moment, then straightened and...mostly...stopped shaking.

"This one is not scared. This lowly one is prepared to accept punishment for one's wrongdoings. This one apologizes for the unseemly display."

His heart cracked further. Xiao's voice was so flat and dead...there was no question in the tone, no doubt. Like he knew what was coming and accepted it...but it *wasn't* coming, and the yaksha had no clue how to persuade the boy of that. Except time. Time without being punished for every little thing.

He suspected this was a conversation that was going to be repeated many, many times, for a long while.

"Why do you think you're going to be punished, little whirlwind?"

"Honorable one was hurting this one. Mighty one was restraining this one. Was this not for punishment?"

There was a bit of a quaver in his voice with the question, betraying uncertainty. Madame Ping Ping sucked in a shocked breath at Xiao's words, and responded before Bosacius could.

"Oh, sweetheart, *no*. You aren't being punished. You passed out because you didn't have enough adeptal energy, and we had to supplement it. Bosacius was holding you down because the flow has to be smooth to be safe, and you kept trying to move. We didn't know it was causing you pain..."

Madame Ping paused to compose herself, and Bosacius restrained the urge to reach a hand out to comfort her. That would involve reaching across the little whirlwind, and he doubted that'd go over well right now.

"This one does not understand."

Still that mostly dead tone, still that slight quaver.

"Do you remember meeting Menogias, Indarias, and Bonanus yesterday, little whirlwind?"

"This one remembers."

"When everyone started to leave, Indarias startled you, and you jumped and tried to do something. Do you remember that?"

“This one remembers. This one tried to teleport, and failed, and fell, and could not move. This one knows one is to be punished for this one’s weakness and poor reactions. This one is ready.”

The quaver was gone, Xiao’s voice completely dead and devoid of emotion. Bosacius couldn’t stop fresh tears from rolling down his face, and had to swallow a few times before he could actually speak again.

“No, little whirlwind. You are absolutely not going to be punished for that. It was not your fault. The reason your teleport failed and you couldn’t move is because you didn’t have enough power - what Madame Ping called adeptal energy - left in your body. You...you almost died.”

Bosacius had to stop and swallow again, and he noticed that Xiao had lifted his head just enough to peer at his face. He paused, but unfortunately, the kid didn’t speak up. Or maybe fortunately. Maybe it meant he was actually thinking about the yaksha’s words...but he wasn’t sure how to continue. He looked helplessly at Madame Ping, and thankfully, she picked up where he left off.

“To keep you alive, we had to give you some of our own...power. But your body wouldn’t have been able to handle it all at once, so we had to give it to you as a slow flow. You...you still need more, and it’s still slowly draining, and we don’t know why. Do you...I don’t suppose you know why your power is draining, little one?”

Golden eyes once more out of sight, Xiao’s head was once more fully bent in his habitual manner.

“No, honorable one.”

Bosacius wished he wasn’t aware of how long it might take to completely eradicate that dead tone, now that it had shown up.

Madame Ping sighed.

“Then I’m sorry, little one, but we *have* to continue until you at least have enough energy to withstand a thorough reading and some healing. We...we can slow it down. Maybe that won’t hurt so much.”

There was no response, and the yaksha could see the guilt and sorrow growing on the healer’s face.

“We don’t want to *lose* you, child...”

No response. Another sigh.

“Would you like us to take a break, let you settle? Would that help? We will have to continue eventually, but it’s probably safe to wait an hour or so, at this point...”

“This one will do as honorable one wishes. This one is to follow orders. This one will obey.”

“That’s not what she meant, little whirlwind...”

“This one will obey.”

Madame Ping’s eyes closed for a moment, then she placed her hand back on the boy’s forehead. Xiao flinched at the touch, but did not otherwise react, sitting perfectly still and staring at his knees.

Bosacius couldn’t watch anymore. His presence was clearly no longer a comfort to the kid, and the contrast was making it painfully clear to him just how much life the little whirlwind had been

showing the previous days, and to see all trace of that life wiped away, though he was still alive, though he still moved and breathed and spoke...

“I’ll...I’ll go get Bonanus. You can’t have gotten enough rest, Madame Ping.”

He barely waited for her nod before leaving the room. As soon as the door was softly closed behind him, Bosacius’ control broke. He pressed his forehead to the wall and stopped trying to fight the tears, though he still tried to keep it quiet. No need to distract the others, and no telling how it’d affect Xiao if he heard.

He had seen other kids shut down like this, of course. With the world outside Morax’s borders being like it was, it was inevitable that some of the refugees they took in would have come from some very bad situations. It didn’t have to be permanent, they *could* recover, could start to see the wonder in things again, learn to be happy, to enjoy things. Especially the younger ones. For all they were fragile, kids were also incredibly resilient.

But Bosacius had foolishly allowed himself to hope that the little whirlwind wasn’t in that bad shape. It was stupid. Given how long they’d gotten reports of the destruction caused by Alatus, they were fairly certain he’d been enslaved for at least a century. Even if his current level of...physical damage...hadn’t been typical for the entire time, there was no way he’d come out of that less traumatized than the worst of the cases among the human children. He knew this. He’d known this when he’d volunteered to help. Why had he deceived himself?

Of *course* the child had been more alert and interested at first. New place, new rules, new ‘master’ - how Morax must *hate* being called that - he wouldn’t be able to check out like that immediately. He’d need to assess the situation first, out of sheer self-preservation. And once he woke up in a situation that had given every appearance of being what he had *expected* to find, what he was used to, of course he had resorted to his old survival tools. It shouldn’t be a surprise. It wasn’t, really. But it still hurt. It would hurt with any child, but he had seen the kid behind that mask, and he already loved that little whirlwind like the kid brother he’d never had. It hurt that *he* hurt, and would keep hurting for awhile, probably a long time, and that there was nothing the yaksha could do to make it go away immediately.

Bosacius couldn’t even help Xiao to recover in the long term, much, unless the kid let him.

A comforting hand settled on the yaksha’s shoulder, and he realized Morax must’ve followed him out of Xiao’s room.

“Are you alright, Bosacius?”

The yaksha sighed and wiped at his eyes with one hand.

“I’ll be fine, my lord. He’d been doing so well, I just...”

Another sigh, and he turned to look at the god - and promptly found something new to worry about. He hadn’t seen Morax looking so...beaten...in centuries, at least.

“Morax? Are *you* alright?”

There was a pause.

“I...you said he had been doing *well*? How is...he has been terrified of everything, of *me*, even of *Madame Ping* at her sweetest...he won’t eat unless I order it, and now this...what part of this is doing *well*?”

Morax was getting louder and more upset with every word, his hands fisted so tight by his sides that Bosacius was surprised there wasn't blood dripping from them.

"For what he's been through...yes, he is doing well, even with today. Morax..."

Bocius sighed. He'd done that a lot, the last few minutes.

"This will take awhile to explain, and I don't know how much longer Madame Ping can keep working on him. Can we talk on my way to get Bonanus? Or when I get back?"

"I...of course. I did not intend to impede you."

"I know."

Bosacius managed a brief smile, albeit strained, at the god as he started towards the entrance to the subspace.

"I know it doesn't seem like it, especially this morning, but Xiao has shown us a remarkable amount of trust for a child who has been through what he has. We might not know the details yet, or ever, but we don't need to - his behaviors and physical condition tell us plenty. I thought it would be at least a few days, probably longer, before he willingly came in arm's reach of me - yet he did so within an hour. He was remarkably calm for most of yesterday afternoon as well, surrounded in close quarters by so many powerful beings whose actions he couldn't predict. He's had remarkably few panic attacks, all things considered - Madame Ping and I figured we'd be accidentally poking triggers on a regular basis the first few days, until we figured out what most of them were."

They were outside the Madame Ping's now, making their way towards the entrance of the larger subspace referred to as the Yaksha Pavilion. Bosacius looked over at Morax, trying to gauge how his lord was taking the information. Not well, probably, given the tense shoulders and furrowed brow. The yaksha sighed again - it had always been hard for the god to put himself in another's shoes.

"Think about it, my lord. Probably every time he's been around someone as powerful as most of those he's met here, for the last century, it's been either in combat or when that person was hurting him. He came here hurt and weakened, even more vulnerable than he normally would be - if his adeptal energy were always this low, he would have died long since. He probably has no concept that someone stronger might protect him - once he trusted me at all, I would've expected him to try to hide behind me when he felt threatened, but he never tried it once. If beings of power such as adepts and gods have only ever been threats to him, why would he think to trust us to do anything but harm him?"

They walked in silence for a minute or two, as the yaksha gave his god space to process this.

"If you are right about all of this...and I do trust your knowledge and experience in the matter, Bosacius...then why did he ever agree to the contract? If he truly believed I could not be trusted..."

Bosacius let out a long breath. That was one connection he'd hoped Morax *wouldn't* make.

"I doubt he truly understood he had a choice. He probably thought of it as simply a framework for the most serious of the new rules he was to follow. A series of orders."

He realized suddenly that Morax had stopped, and turned back to see the god staring at him with wide eyes and horrified guilt written on his face.

“That cannot - the basis of a contract is choice, the *free and uncoerced* agreement of all parties - I - did I - “

Morax’s eyes closed, and his hand flew to his mouth as if he were going to be sick. Bosacius wasn’t surprised. He knew his old friend hated forced contracts with a passion. He walked back and gently guided his friend to the nearest boulder to sit down. After a moment, the god bent over and his hands moved to hold himself tightly across his gut.

“What have I done...”

“You didn’t know, Morax. With the knowledge you had at the time, you couldn’t have known. I have no doubt, knowing you, that you did everything you knew to do to make sure he understood. It’s not your fault that he still didn’t, or that you were unaware of it.”

“You would have known. Madame Ping would have known.”

“We weren’t there. You did the best you could with the information available to you. And I have no doubt, that had Xiao truly understood that he was free to say no, and had he truly understood that you could be trusted to hold to your end, he would have agreed.”

“It does not matter. He did not agree freely. What I did was wrong.”

“You can’t change the past, Morax. All you can do is not make any more contracts with him until you know for sure he understands.”

“I should ask him if he wants to void the contract.”

Bosacius snorted.

“It’s the same problem all over again. He wouldn’t understand, and you’d probably terrify him. He’d think he failed and broke one of the rules somehow, probably.”

Morax groaned and rested his head in his hands.

“Is there anything I can do to fix this, Bosacius? *Anything* you can think of?”

The yaksha shook his head gently.

“Be kind. Be patient. *Don’t* try to apologize until he properly understands choice, you’ll just confuse and scare him.”

Another groan, and then silence. Bosacius waited a long moment, and then coughed.

“I need to go tell Bonanus she’s needed...will you be alright? I can come back as soon as she’s on her way...”

“Go. I will be fine.”

The yaksha eyed his lord doubtfully, but he didn’t have much choice. He really did have to go.

It didn’t take too much longer for Bosacius to reach the entrance of the Pavilion. He took a deep breath before using the passthrough - he knew his siblings, and they were probably waiting for him

to bring them news.

He was right.

Bosacius barely took two steps into the subspace before Indarias slammed into him, clinging to him, hiccupping and sobbing.

“I’m sorry, I’m *so sorry*, I didn’t mean to scare him, i-is he alright? He was so pale, I’ve never seen Madame Ping so *worried*, I didn’t *kill* him, did I? *Please* tell me I didn’t kill him!”

He wrapped his lower arms around her shoulders.

“No, you didn’t kill him. He’s even awake again. Here, let’s move to the logs, okay? I’ll tell all of you what’s going on, but we can’t be blocking the entrance.”

Bosacius looked up to meet the worried eyes of Bonanus and Menogias, and gestured towards the meeting area with his chin. They nodded - Bonanus looked like she’d been crying too. That was unusual for her; the hydro yaksha usually worked hard to hide it when she was upset, covering it by lashing out with sarcasm or snark and refusing to cry if she wasn’t able to take the time to hide somewhere alone.

This was not going to be a fun conversation.

Not that he’d thought it would be.

He guided Indarias towards the log seats, generally used for briefings before groups headed out on missions and such. The other two followed, and soon all four were seated in a close group. The pyro yaksha leaned on Bosacius, still sniffing, but clearly much calmer than when he arrived.

“Xiao’s collapse last night was because he attempted to use his powers when he didn’t have enough adeptal energy left to do so. Apparently, something has been slowly draining it this whole time, and we don’t know what, or why.”

The marshal paused, letting the others get a handle on themselves. They’d gasped at the revelation, and no wonder; adeptal energy was in some ways, a very personal thing. He’d heard a couple humans refer to it as an adeptus’ ‘life force’, when explaining it was attempted. The list of ways to lose it, other than overuse, was short; none of the known ones would cause such a steady, slow drain. It was a horrifying thought for any adeptus, to consider having their energy slowly and remorselessly sapped in such a fashion.

“Madame Ping has had to resort to emergency measures to treat this problem; namely, supplementing his energy with our own. So far it has been working, enough so that he woke up this morning. Our goal for the moment is to get him to the point where he’s relatively stable, and can handle a comprehensive reading and proper treatment. Unfortunately, it appears that receiving energy in this manner, when already so depleted, can cause pain - “

This time the electro yaksha had to break off and pause for his own sake, struggling to maintain emotional control in front of his subordinates. For all they considered each other siblings, he was still their leader, and he knew he had to be strong for them. After a moment, he took a deep breath and continued.

“That, combined with a nightmare, resulted in a severe panic attack when Xiao woke this morning, and as a result he has retreated into himself for the time being, so I’m afraid he can’t have any visitors who are not involved in his treatment for now. Sorry, Indy, I know you want to make sure he’s fine for yourself, but that wouldn’t be helpful right now.”

Indarias nodded and sniffled a little.

“I know. I’d probably *terrify* him, after...I’ll give him space, Bosacius. Just let me know when I *can* see him?”

“Of course.”

He gave her a little hug with one arm before looking at the others and continuing.

“For now, we’re having to provide him with a near-constant flow, but given his trust issues, and the situation...in an attempt to reduce the likelihood of panic attacks, only those he’s shown some level of trust towards are helping with this. Unfortunately, there aren’t many of us yet...Bonanus, are you up to it? You seemed to make progress with him yesterday.”

The hydro yaksha looked startled, but nodded after a moment.

“I’m willing to try.”

“Thank you. I know it’s hard, but try not to take it personally if he reacts differently this time. This morning was...bad. Madame Ping’s on flow duty right now, but she’s exhausted - head on up and she’ll show you what to do.”

Bonanus nodded and stood, and so did he.

“I have some other things I need to see to, will you two be alright now that you’re briefed?”

Indarias and Menogias nodded, then the latter spoke up.

“I hope one of those things is rest? You look exhausted, Bosacius.”

The electro yaksha gave a strained smile.

“That obvious, huh? Don’t worry, I’ll get some sleep eventually. There’s just something I need to do first.”

Because he wasn’t about to leave his friend and lord *alone* to marinate in guilt and self-hatred.

Chapter End Notes

Expect the next chapter this coming weekend, and then nothing until the game update. I'm trying to have extra to drop when maintenance starts, so there's something to read when we all can't play the game~

As always, feel free to speculate in the comments~ Feel free to ask questions too, though I'll probably only answer if it's something that doesn't touch on spoilers XD

Sleep deep, dream well!

An Answer

Chapter Notes

Friday counts as the weekend, right?

This chapter may be short, but it's pretty well packed, I think.

TW this chapter: Nothing unusual for this story. Pain, the expectation of torture I suppose. If I missed something let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Madame Ping woke from her rest, the first thing she had to do was convince Bosacius to sleep. The yaksha was as bad as Morax, refusing to rest until he was sure he wasn't needed by anyone - but if he didn't do so, he wouldn't be able to keep up a steady flow when his turn came.

Once she had him settled, the healer checked on Xiao. He was progressing nicely, in terms of his adeptal energy - Morax would probably be able to help by the following morning, and she would wait until he'd been doing so for a few hours before doing an in-depth reading and the more intense magical healing the child so clearly needed. He would probably be able to handle those earlier, honestly, but she didn't want him to fall all the way back to where they'd started if things went wrong.

For now, she did a light, general reading before taking over from Bonanus, just to make sure they weren't missing something urgent...and frowned. He wasn't bleeding internally or anything, though she noted some older injuries she'd missed before, but he was...hard to read. Energy swirled within his body in unusual ways, and interfered with her senses.

Madame Ping looked up at the boy's emotionless face, and sighed. Perhaps she'd have more luck later, when she dared to put more power behind it. For now...for all the progress in one aspect of his healing, Xiao seemed to be moving backwards in others. It worried her how far he'd retreated...he hadn't even flinched when she'd touched him for that light reading, and while she might otherwise consider that a *good* sign, when combined with his apathetic lack of response in general, it was anything but.

He was aware, clearly. He would respond to questions - albeit with simple answers, a great deal of formality, and no more emotion in his voice than showed on his face. She'd just have to hope he'd come out of it once this was all over.

Before she took over, Madame Ping gestured for Bonanus to follow her out into the hall. The girl had clearly been crying, and who could blame her? It was hard for all of them to see the young adeptus this way. Once safely out of Xiao's sight and earshot, she opened her arms and held Bonanus while the yaksha wept for a moment on her shoulder.

"I didn't want to hurt him, but I think I was, no matter how th-thin I made the flow. I tried to ask him if it was any better, but all he would say was 'This lowly one is well, gentle one,' in that awful, dead voice...is he going to be okay?"

Madame Ping was quiet for a long moment. If it had been Indarias asking, she would have

immediately reassured her. But Bonanus had always preferred the truth, even if it was painful.

“I don’t know. His energy levels *are* improving, and quicker than I’d hoped, but until we know what caused the problem in the first place, it’s impossible to say how fixable it is. I will do everything in my power to help the child heal, Bonanus. I believe the chances are good, for his physical state, if we can solve this problem and get him to eat and rest. Bosacius still thinks he’s doing remarkably well emotionally for what we think he’s been through. But I know you prefer honesty, and the honest answer is we won’t know for sure until he either recovers, or doesn’t.”

The hydro yaksha pulled back slowly and wiped at her eyes.

“I...knew that, I guess. Sorry, that wasn’t a fair question.”

The healer forced a chuckle and a reassuring smile.

“It’s the situation that isn’t fair, my dear. Now, how about you go get some rest, and try not to snap too much at Indarias on the way, hmm?”

Bonanus laughed weakly.

“I’ll try. Thanks, Madame Ping.”

“Oh, and if you see Morax, could you tell him to come by with a mug of the broth? He’ll know what I mean.”

And given his perfect memory, even if he was distracted at the time, he *should* remember where she got it and how she warmed it up. It wasn’t exactly complex.

“Sure.”

The yaksha hesitated a moment.

“Good luck in there. I hope...I hope you can get through to him better than I could.”

The healer nodded to the yaksha, and opened the door.

The boy was sitting precisely as he had been when they left, legs beneath him in the center of the bed. He looked to have moved about as much as a statue.

Madame Ping sighed, and moved to sit facing Xiao on the bed. Unfortunately, she couldn’t completely ignore the rest of the child’s treatment while they dealt with the energy problem. But maybe if she was lucky, this could pull him out of his shell...

“Xiao? Little one, could you look at me for a moment?”

Slowly, his face lifted to - well, face her. He was positioned as though he was looking into her eyes, but there was no focus in those dead-looking eyes. She swallowed and tried to pretend not to notice.

“I know this has been a very stressful day for you, but if I put off tending your wounds much longer they could get worse. I do have to tend them, but maybe I can make the timing a little easier for you. Would you prefer I change your bandages and apply salve to your burns now, before I start supplementing your energy, or in a few hours when Bosacius takes over? Or perhaps half now and half later?”

She knew it was a long shot, trying to draw him out with a choice when he hadn’t figured out

choices were an option yet, but...

“This lowly one will do as the honorable one requires.”

She sighed.

“Honestly, I’m fine with whichever option you prefer, little one.”

No response. Not unexpected, really...

“Alright then. Let’s get this over with, shall we? Perhaps some relief on those burns will feel nice, hmm?”

Madame Ping gently lifted Xiao’s left arm and started changing his bandages, noting that he still didn’t flinch or react in any way, not even indicating relief when the numbing salve was applied. Given his prior reactions, this was disturbing to say the least, and she was as gentle as possible to avoid causing him any more pain than necessary.

She finished with his arms and legs, then hesitated, remembering the way the boy had panicked over lifting his shirt before. That...was not the way she wanted him brought back out. With a sigh, she decided to leave that part of things for later. It wasn’t ideal, but what about this situation was?

“All done, little one.”

There was no response, but she didn’t really expect one at this point. The healer got up and put the spare supplies in a drawer of the dresser - there wasn’t much harm he could do himself with bandages and burn salve, after all, and it was useful to have them to hand - and returned to settle herself behind the child once more, using a pillow to prop up her arm for the long hours of her shift. As she reached for his forehead, she made one more attempt to get through.

“I’ll be as gentle as I can, but let me know if it becomes too much, little one. You’ve progressed enough that we can take short breaks if you need to.”

“This lowly one is well, honorable one.”

The healer closed her eyes and sighed as she began.

*‘No, little one, you aren’t. But we’ll do our best to ensure you **will** be.’*

He wasn’t entirely certain how long it had been since he was last fully aware. He dimly remembered several changes of who was pushing that burning energy into his head, his limbs being moved and prodded at. He was fairly certain he’d responded to orders properly, since he didn’t remember any increases in pain. And it was exactly that lack of additional pain that eventually forced him to start paying attention again.

Had he been wrong? Had they not lied, after all? Was there no ‘rest of the punishment’ coming?

It made no sense. He'd done wrong since he'd been here, over and over and over. He'd been so *sure* the burning energy was the start of the consequences. It was the only thing that made sense, because if they were telling the truth and it was some strange form of healing, why would so many powerful ones be wasting their time and energies on *him*?

When would things make sense again? His head hurt and not just from that burning power. He felt lost and adrift and there was nothing solid to grab onto, nothing he knew for sure was true, except that he'd messed up terribly somewhere and he wasn't sure where since it apparently wasn't where he *thought* it was.

He'd have to try not to let them know he was aware again. It was possible the rest of the punishment hadn't happened because they'd noticed his retreat; Master Moharus did that sometimes, because it didn't count if he didn't feel it properly.

And he'd watch, and listen, and see if he could find some solid ground.

Menogias worried as he made his way up the hill, though he strove to keep it from his face. This wasn't the first time Madame Ping had sent for his help, of course, but it was the first time for this patient - and given how his friends and siblings, Bonanus and Bosacius, looked whenever they returned from a shift, he couldn't help but think sending for his talents was a desperation measure on Madame Ping's part.

As he walked, the geo yaksha gradually forced his elemental sight to its fullest extent. While he almost always had it active, to add color to his otherwise gray world, he had long since learned how to partially activate it to various levels; keeping it at full for long had a tendency to give him a migraine. That said, there was only one reason he'd be sent for, and if Madame Ping's readings weren't detailed enough, they'd need every last bit of detail he could squeeze from his senses.

By the time he reached the entrance to Madame Ping's, even the grass was faintly dendro-colored.

Menogias closed his eyes as he stepped through the pass-through, so as not to be blinded by the energies, then walked the few steps to the door, hoping he'd find the right room without trouble. The healer *must've* been in a state when she'd sent the message, because she'd slipped up and referred to the room's location by stating the color of the door...and he had no idea what 'dark teal' was. He stuck his head down the hall...

...ah. Only one door was dark. That must be it.

The yaksha walked up and knocked first, just to be sure. He didn't think Madame Ping had any other patients at the moment, but you never knew...but it was the right room, and in a moment he heard the healer telling him to come in.

He opened the door and stepped in, taking in the situation. Xiao was kneeling in the center of the bed, the familiar dendro-colored form of Madame Ping sitting in front of him, holding his hand. She'd probably been doing another reading while she waited. On the other side of the room, his beautiful, brilliantly geo-colored lord sat, looking worried. Menogias' heart skipped a beat, and he

firmly told himself to keep his face blank, and stay focused on the reason he was here.

“I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been trying to determine where Xiao’s energy is going, but I just can’t...get enough detail, with a reading. As far as I can tell, it’s swirling around oddly but aimlessly. Can you see anything more?”

“I would be glad to try.”

Menogias knelt by the bed, for a better angle, and tried to *peer* beneath the young adeptus’ skin. At first glance, his observations matched the healer’s own. The boy’s own anemo swirled agitatedly, occasional streaks of other elements showing where donated power had not yet been completely absorbed and converted. Then he caught a flash...was that *cryo*? Whatever it was, it was quickly hidden by the swirling, muddled anemo...

Frowning, he leaned closer and squinted, trying to see *beneath*. His head pounded, it always did when he pushed things this hard...gradually the top layers faded to transparency as he focused below them. He’d never heard of anyone else who could do this, though it seemed obvious to him - he was living proof that elemental sight was not based on physical vision, after all. As the view cleared, what was revealed was...both beautiful and terrifying.

Tiny crystalline tubes of cryo, with the slightest hints of geo, formed what looked almost like a root system through the child’s entire body, apparently originating from the center of his forehead. The near parts gleamed in nonexistent light, sharp and clear and *solid*, the further ‘roots’ fading into obscurity - he couldn’t see where the ones in Xiao’s back led at all. He had never seen anything like it, and if it had been anywhere but *inside someone’s body*, he would have thought it a brilliant work of craftsmanship.

Now that he could see them, it was clear these crystalline ‘roots’ were absorbing the child’s energy much the way a plant’s roots would absorb water. He couldn’t see where it went from there - it anywhere - but he could see the swirls of element-streaked anemo slowly getting pulled into the cryo formation.

Menogias felt sick. Who would make something like this? *Why?*

“I...I think I see the problem. I know I do, it’s just...”

He swallowed, and attempted to regain his self-control. He never stammered like this, he wasn’t going to start now. No matter how horrifying this...thing...was.

“There’s some sort of cryo structure inside his body, threaded with hints of geo. It looks almost like roots...whatever it is, it’s sucking in Xiao’s adeptal energy, all right. I don’t know enough anatomy to know whether the placement means anything...”

There was a moment’s silence, but the geo yaksha didn’t look up. He was at the right focus level now; it was probably best to stay that way until they were done.

“Can you trace where some of these roots go? On his arm, maybe, if there are any there?”

“They’re there. They’re *everywhere*.”

He lifted a finger and followed one of the roots down the child’s nearest arm, noting aloud where it branched, and following a line of it all the way down one of his fingers. Then, at Madame Ping’s request, he traced a few of the branchings.

“Not the circulatory system, but I didn’t really think it was. I suspect this is the strangeness I

sensed about his nervous system, but...what on *earth* is it for?"

Morax spoke up.

"Moharus used cryo. Given the effects now, perhaps he was siphoning off power for his own use? The structure could have been to filter and attune it, so it would be safer for him to absorb..."

"If that were the case, he should be getting stronger with that beast dead, not weaker."

The frown was clear in Madame Ping's voice.

"Alright. You identified what the elemental side is doing, and where I need to look; now it's my job to investigate the physical effects, and figure out how to stop it...if we can. Could you keep watch to see if it reacts elementally? I know this is painful for you to keep up for any length of time..."

"I know how important this is. Don't worry, I can stick it out. Indarias is back at the pavilion preparing my room for an ideal recovery space when I return."

"Alright. Tell me if it gets to be too much, though."

The healer leaned forward, and her dendro entered his vision as she focused her probing reading on the nerves of Xiao's arm...

Xiao snuck a peek at the solid one when he knelt by the bed, hoping no one noticed. He wasn't sure what he was going to do - the honorable one's 'readings' didn't hurt, didn't feel like anything really except where she touched his skin to do them. But it sounded like they'd called the solid one for something different.

It looked like he was just staring at Xiao. Or...more like through him. The young adeptus quickly returned his gaze to his knees, keeping his face as blank and still as possible.

He was pretty sure none of them had realized he was...present...again. He'd been able to keep up the act so far, anticipating touches and purposefully relaxing his muscles so he wouldn't flinch, speaking only when necessary and in an even, emotionless tone, staring blankly. The burn of power on his forehead had stopped a bit ago, and then they'd started talking. He hadn't learned much. There had been some discussion of trying to see what was going on inside him, and at first he'd thought they were going to cut him open to look, but instead the honorable one had said something about a 'reading' and had just placed a hand against his side. There had been frustrated noises, then something about sending for Menogias and some paper rustling. He'd felt the presence of the god leave the room and return.

Now the solid one was here, and staring...though him? He didn't feel anything, but it somehow made him feel threatened. He didn't like it. Not that there was ever anything he could do about not liking something.

“I...I think I see the problem. I know I do, it’s just...”

...why did the solid one sound so shaken? Xiao had to force himself to stay still, not react. He tensed up some, but he didn’t think anyone noticed...

“There’s some sort of cryo structure inside his body, threaded with hints of geo. It looks almost like roots...”

‘What?!’

Xiao missed the rest of what was said in sudden panic. There couldn’t be cryo in him. There *couldn’t*. No one here seemed to use cryo. Master Moharus was cryo, but Master Moharus was *dead*. He was, right? He’d know if he wasn’t, there’d still be orders beating at his head, right?

He struggled to keep his breathing even, to keep from shaking, to regain control. He didn’t know enough yet. He didn’t know if they were safe. He had to keep up the act.

Then honorable one touched his arm, and a moment later all-too-familiar agony shot along his nerves, and he knew it wasn’t safe.

They weren’t trying to help him.

They just wanted to learn to use Master Moharus’ methods to *control* him.

Screams tore themselves from Xiao’s throat as his act collapsed under the onslaught of pain.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't kill me! -ducks-

There'll be more to read when the game's update maintenance starts, or shortly thereafter! In the meantime, now that certain things have been revealed, I am willing to answer questions if some of it isn't clear. Some things will be more clear in later chapters, and not **everything** has been revealed yet, but anything that you're intended to know at this point I will gladly answer.

Looking forward to speculations and theories -grin-

Thank you for reading, sleep deep and dream well!

Repurcussions

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the late chapter, and for it being so short, guys! My ability to write was derailed by a new health issue being thrown my way. I can write again, but not as fast as I was initially, so chapters might be a bit slower for a bit...

TW for this chapter: migraines, graphic descriptions of intense pain, self-hatred

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Menogias saw a pulse of power race through the cryo structure an instant before the screams started. He had just long enough to see the prodded segment of crystal dissolve into sand before he threw himself out of the way and focused on bringing his elemental sight down to a saner level. Those screams had shoved him right past 'incipient migraine' into 'full-blown nightmare migraine', and he wasn't going to be of use to anyone until he got that under control. Best to just get back and let the others help the kid.

He dimly heard others rushing around the room, worried voices shouting to be heard over the continuing screams. Someone ran out of the room, then two people ran back in. The screams trailed off into broken sobs, and as bad as he felt for the child, Menogias couldn't help a sigh of relief as his head throbbed a little less. Softer voices spoke to one side, but it hurt too much to try to differentiate who was talking, much less what was being said.

The geo yaksha's awareness was starting to fade in and out when he realized someone was kneeling in front of him. He opened his eyes briefly, wincing at the now- *way*- too-bright light in the room.

Morax.

It was Morax.

Menogias put a hand to his forehead and tried not to groan.

"Can you stand?"

Even as softly as the question was spoken, the additional sound stabbed at his ears like arrows, and he winced. Clearly, his migraine wasn't done getting worse.

But it was Morax asking.

He didn't want to look weak in front of Morax.

He gave a short nod - regretting it as his head swam - and slowly stood, half pulling himself up by the dresser behind him. The motion triggered the nausea that often came with his migraines, and Menogias swallowed repeatedly as his gorge rose.

He was *not* going to vomit on his god.

Or in front of him.

Menogias stood there for a moment, eyes screwed shut, swaying as he tried to keep his stomach down and regain some sense of balance. He could do this. He just had to make it out the front door and through the passthrough, then he could find a tree to puke behind in private before getting down the hill to the pavilion, and the nice, dark, quiet room Indarias would have ready.

He could do this.

It wasn't that far.

....he could at least make it out of Morax's sight, surely...

The geo yaksha jumped - and regretted it - as he felt another arm grip his and lift a bit, providing support.

"I've got you."

Menogias swallowed repeatedly and struggled to calm his heartrate as the god guided him slowly out of the room and down the hall. A pity he wasn't in any shape to appreciate this properly - his head throbbed harder at the reminder - but then, if he were in better shape, this wouldn't be happening. He was under no illusions. This was just a leader taking care of one of his people, and Morax would do the same for any yaksha, any of the adepts, possibly even the humans.

But part of him didn't care.

Gradually, he realized they weren't heading to the front door.

"Where...?"

He made the mistake of opening his eyes and promptly closed them again, reeling after the onslaught of light.

"Do not open your eyes. We are not going far; only to another room, far enough away to hopefully not be bothered by...loud noises."

"Whabbout...the pavilion..."

Menogias grimaced. Apparently he couldn't even talk properly, anymore.

"You are not in any shape to make it that far."

They stopped, and there was the sound of a door opening. A few steps more, and his legs bumped into the padded edge of a bed.

"Here you are. Please, rest. And...thank you. Even with what happened...the information you provided is invaluable."

A soft click as the door closed, and he was alone.

The familiar agony raced up and down his limbs, tightened his chest, split his head, tore through his insides. No matter how many times Xiao experienced it, it was always endless, always blinded him to everything else, and never got any less excruciating.

An interminable period of time later, it ended, leaving behind a throbbing ache everywhere in his body. His arm, where the honorable one had touched it, felt like it was being burned and scraped raw at the same time. Telltale soreness in his throat told him he'd been screaming, and wet cheeks alerted him to his own sobbing.

He had to stop. Crying was bad. He'd be punished more.

What did it matter? He'd trusted them. He'd tried not to, but it wouldn't hurt so much if he'd succeeded. He'd been stupid. He'd allowed himself to hope. And now that lightness in his heart had turned to heavy stone, and that stone was cracked and broken with betrayal.

It was nothing more than he deserved, he knew.

Unlike the little whirlwind in the story - the thought of the one that told the story twisted like a red-hot blade in his gut - he deserved this pain, and more. The little whirlwind hadn't had a choice. He had. Moharus could control his physical actions, but not his powers.

Every time he ate a dream, it was of his own volition.

Every empty-eyed husk that fell was blood on *his* hands.

All because he was too *afraid* to say no, and because some disgusting, awful part of him *wanted* that sweet taste on his tongue, whatever the cost.

He'd always been the demon he'd been named. He didn't deserve kindness, or healing. He deserved pain and suffering. And if he'd found a master who would deliver that pain without the suffering of others, that was for the best.

But Xiao was selfish. So he wept, and sobbed, and pleaded for mercy he didn't deserve.

Bosacius snapped awake as agonized screams tore through the walls, and was moving immediately. Unfortunately, his initial movement was more like panicked flailing, and he hit the floor with a *thud* while still tangled in his blankets.

The electro yaksha had just fought his way free of the fabric and stood when a wide-eyed Morax threw open his door.

"Good, you are awake. We need your help with Xiao."

The screams were louder in the hall.

"What happened?"

“We found the problem, but when Madame Ping tried to investigate it directly, something went very wrong.”

“Clearly. Any new visible injuries to be careful of?”

“No, he just started screaming.”

The two practically skidded into Xiao’s room, and Bosacius barely noted Menogias leaning against the dresser before the little whirlwind claimed his attention and his heart dropped to his feet.

The kid was still on the bed; small blessings, he supposed. He was also writhing in pain, not convulsing but rather moving as though he wasn’t sure which part of himself he wanted to curl around most, eyes wide, pupils practically nonexistent, staring blankly as tears streamed down. Madame Ping stood a little ways away, face filled with guilt, looking like she wanted to hold him, but didn’t quite dare to touch him.

Fuck that.

The little whirlwind might not trust him anymore, but Bosacius wasn’t going to leave him to endure whatever *that* was alone.

Dodging unpredictable movements - not perfectly, Xiao smacked him a good one on the chin with the back of his head - he scooped the child up and held him tightly in all four arms. He murmured comforting words, well aware the kid couldn’t hear them, but that the thrum of his voice vibrating through his chest might reach the boy. He hoped.

After a couple minutes, the screams finally stopped, converting into broken sobs. Bosacius sat there on the edge of the bed, gently rocking Xiao and making soothing noises. He heard Morax say something about handling Menogias, and responded absently, still focused on trying to comfort the little whirlwind, and studiously ignoring the tears on his own face. Eventually, he felt the child stiffen in his arms.

With a sorrowful sigh, he complied with the unspoken request and set the boy back on the bed, though the sobs continued. He should be glad, he supposed, that Xiao had accepted comfort from him as long as he *had* . If that was no longer the case, he’d only make things worse now if he held the kid longer. But if he couldn’t accept physical touch from a person...the electro yaksha reached for one of the spare blankets on the end of the bed, shook it out and threw it around the kid’s shoulders. It was better than nothing.

There were soft words mixed in with the tears and shuddering breaths...Bosacius leaned closer to hear, careful not to actually touch the little whirlwind.

”...please...please have mercy on this lowly one...this one knows one deserves the punishment, but please, p-please...please don’t hurt th-this one anymore...”

He hadn’t thought his heart could break further. He was wrong.

Morax gently closed the door on Menogias with a sigh. The straightforward yaksha was always so willing to disregard his own limits to help others, for all he was quieter about it than some others. Though, admittedly, none of them had been prepared for Xiao's reaction...

When he returned to the room of the young adeptus, it was just in time to see Bosacius swing a blanket around Xiao's shoulders. The electro yaksha leaned forward after a moment, looking intent, then his face crumpled and he started whispering something to the boy. Whatever it was, it didn't work - Xiao seemed to cry harder if anything. With a sigh, Bosacius stood, and gestured for him and Madame Ping to head into the hall with him.

"Just call for us if you need us, okay, little whirlwind? We'll...we'll let you be, for now."

Morax frowned at his marshal, but left the room when the others did. Was it really okay to leave the young one alone, when he was so distraught? Shouldn't they instead be holding and comforting him?

"Bosacius, why - "

He was cut off.

"He's afraid of us right now. All of us. I'm sorry. I...I couldn't really do anything...Madame Ping..."

The god was startled to realize that his head healer was actively crying, hand to her mouth, eyes tightly closed. After a moment she lowered her hand and spoke.

"He...he thinks I hurt him on purpose, doesn't he? To punish him for something no one but that *monster* would ever blame a child for..."

"He didn't say so outright, but...yes, I think so. He was begging for mercy whenever he could get a breath through to do so."

Morax caught the healer under the arm as her knees gave out, then swooped his other arm under her knees to pick her up properly.

"Let us relocate to the kitchen. Seating and hot tea may be helpful for this conversation."

Bosacius nodded, and after a moment, so did Madame Ping. The short walk down the hall was filled with more awkward silence than made sense for the time involved, but truthfully, he had no idea how to break it. But the others clearly needed his strength right now, and as their leader and god he was obligated to provide it....if he could only figure out how...but the only thing he could think of was to not break down himself. No matter how much the day's events hurt - no matter how this *whole mess* hurt.

'Ah, Guizhong...I don't believe I've ever needed your advice more than I do now...'

Once in the kitchen, Morax gently set Madame Ping in a chair. He then started making tea for them all, buying time to think as the other two quietly comforted each other behind him.

He tried to think of ways to help his subordinates, and his mind filled with the way Bosacius' face had crumpled, with Madame Ping collapsing in guilt and grief.

He tried to think what to do next for the young adeptus, and his ears rang with remembered screams.

After a moment, he realized that was the teapot screeching, not screams. Absently he poured the boiling water into the three prepared cups, then stared blankly at them as they steeped, and steeped, and steeped....

Xiao was making too much noise to hear the click of the door, but he never stopped being aware of the powerful presences of Master Morax and the others. When he felt them leave the room, and then move off down the hall, at first he didn't believe it. Surely they'd be back soon. Surely they weren't done hurting him already, now that they'd started in earnest.

But they didn't come back.

Maybe they were tired? Maybe figuring out Master Moharus' methods had taken too long, so they were resting before finishing?

...maybe they'd actually listened to his pleas, and were giving him a chance to prove he knew his place?

Unlikely, but...even if they were just resting, if he presented himself properly when they returned, it might lessen Master Morax's ire.

Keeping his senses stretched so he'd know immediately when Master Morax returned, Xiao slipped from the bed and padded to the mirror, evaluating his appearance. His hair was a mess, hanging in greasy strings where it had pulled free from the braid; his eyes were puffy and red from crying; there was entirely too much emotion showing on his face, and his posture showed his continuing pain far too clearly.

He didn't know Master Morax's rules regarding the appearance of slaves yet. Very well, he'd go by Master Moharus'. Maybe the effort would count in his favor.

First, his hair. If Master Moharus had seen it in this much of a mess, with bits of it even partially obscuring his forehead, he would have seen fit to get...creative. Xiao quickly untangled his braid with his fingers, then after a moment's hesitation, picked up the comb. He probably wasn't meant to use it, but he couldn't get his hair completely neatened without it.

It wasn't easy. He hadn't let his braid get this bad in...a very long time. He ignored the pain as hair ripped from his scalp when he didn't let the comb stop for the knots, focused on getting it neat enough to braid tightly as quickly as possible. A few minutes later it was all in a neat braid so tight he could feel it stretching his face, tied with some of the hair that had come loose. The rest he shoved under the bed with the feathers - he really needed to find a good way to get rid of all that soon - and then he wiped the comb off on his shirt as best he could before putting it back.

Looking back in the mirror, Xiao was forced to conclude there wasn't anything he could do about his eyes except refuse to cry any more and hope they returned to normal quickly. For the rest...he forced himself straight, made himself drop his still-burning left arm to his side. With the apparent ease of long practice, he blanked his face, and told himself repeatedly that showing pain meant more pain, that showing weakness meant it being used against him.

Once he was sure he wouldn't forget again, that he could resist the temptation to hide in his wings and weep for the lost illusion of hope, the young adeptus moved to a spot a few paces in front of the door and knelt. He would remain ready, and properly prostrate himself as soon as he felt their presences approaching.

He would obey their orders.

He would be their weapon, their tool, and pray to whatever god might still care about such filth as he, that it would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

I'll *try* to get the next chapter up within a week, but I can't guarantee it'll be that quick at this time. Don't worry, I won't drop the fic!

Sleep deep, dream well!

Medicines and Migraines

Chapter Notes

TW this chapter: More migraines, drugging, experimental procedures maybe?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Morax held the mug of warm broth carefully as he walked down the hall, and hoped that Madame Ping was right that Xiao would still accept orders from him. And that said orders wouldn't make things worse. He wasn't sure how else he'd be able to get the young adeptus to drink this broth...he was hardly likely to be *more* cooperative after the events a few hours earlier.

Hopefully those hours had given the child a chance to recover and relax. It had been painful to see the way he had flinched away from everyone, even knowing why he did so. *Especially* knowing why.

What kind of *monster* would put that kind of construct in another living being? *A child?*

Fury once more licked at the god's heart, and he had to pause for a moment to settle himself. Bosacius and Madame Ping, both, had lectured him on keeping control of his emotions around Xiao. They had done so repeatedly, until he'd finally snapped and told them that his memory was perfect, and he was hardly likely to forget.

Forget, no. Lose control...he hoped not. The child was under *his* protection and the instincts of both sides of his heritage leapt to the fore constantly in Xiao's presence, every time he got a new reminder or glimpse at what the young adeptus was used to, what he had endured.

That train of thought was *not* helping.

Morax took a few deep breaths, reminding himself to focus. The outward appearance of calm was not enough. The young adeptus had already shown that he sensed the presence of others with unusual acuity; no doubt that included strong emotions. He had to *be* calm. Or as calm as he could manage.

...perhaps determined was close enough. It was easier to achieve, anyway. Determination to stay calm.

He would go with that.

The god resumed walking down the hall, reaching Xiao's door quickly - and froze, his determination promptly shaken by shock and confusion.

He'd expected the young adeptus to be resting in the bed after his ordeal. Or perhaps, huddled in a corner in fear - less desirable, but understandable, under the circumstances.

Instead, Xiao was prostrated on the floor, much as he'd done back in the prison subspace when he'd first awoken, and he seemed to have made an effort to clean up his appearance as well - or at least, his hair was once more tightly braided with no apparent loose strands. He looked tense, but no more so than the cramped posture demanded - he didn't seem to be trembling. He wasn't moving much more than a statue, actually.

How long had he been waiting like this?

“Xiao...please, there’s no need for that...”

Morax knelt before the child, careful not to spill the broth.

“Please, at least sit up. That cannot be comfortable.”

To his surprise, the child promptly and smoothly did so, though he kept his head bowed and eyes low.

“There is no need to keep your head low in my presence or anyone else’s, Xiao. You have done nothing to be ashamed of, nor are you in any sort of trouble, and I do not require such gestures of subordination from anyone in my lands.”

There was a moment’s hesitation this time, but to the god’s relief Xiao did raise his gaze partway. He was even more relieved to note that while the child’s face was carefully blank - he did a better job of it than Morax himself, it seemed - his eyes had not regained that awful, dead look that had haunted them all.

“Would you prefer to return to the bed? It would surely be more comfortable.”

“Comfort is of no consequence to such as this one.”

Morax suppressed the urge to growl. It would only do harm. And...he had no idea how to argue that point without making things worse.

“Very well. Allow me to rephrase. Would you please return to the bed, as you are not yet healed and will not heal as effectively if you insist on remaining on the floor.”

Apparently that was the right thing to say, as the young adeptus promptly unfolded to his feet and went to sit on the bed. Morax rose, less gracefully, and handed him the broth.

“Drink this. You won’t heal if you have nothing to heal *with*, either.”

Xiao obediently downed the mug of broth quickly, though the god could swear he looked a little green for a few moments after, despite that blank face. The sedative Madame Ping had mixed in was potent, apparently; the boy was already swaying a little.

“Are you still in any pain anywhere? Is there anything you need?”

“This one is well.”

...they were *all* tired of that damned non-answer. He suspected he wouldn’t get another, even with Xiao drugged, however. He should at least try to encourage a more comfortable position before the child fell off the bed, though...he was perched on the edge of the bed, and already listing, and unlikely to readily accept it if Morax tried to help him physically. He had no wish to see the young adeptus launch away from him again.

“You should lie down and get some sleep, Xiao. It’s been a long day for you.”

“This one...does not...require...”

Xiao collapsed, fast asleep, before he could finish the sentence. Morax had to move quickly to catch him, and then froze for several seconds, waiting to see if the boy reacted. When he remained limp, the god cautiously lifted him and settled the young adeptus more properly in the bed, head on

pillow and covers up to his chin.

Morax hesitated a moment, letting the rare sight of Xiao at peace seep into his heart, before closing his eyes and *feeling* for the boy's presence as Madame Ping had taught him. Unlike the others, it was not easy for him to gauge where the young adeptus' energy sat - his own power had a tendency to cloud his senses somewhat. Was it...lower than it had been, hours before? He thought so...

With a deep sigh, he carefully measured out a slow pulse of power to refill what had presumably been lost, before collecting the mug and heading back to the kitchen.

Madame Ping sighed, waiting for Morax to return. It had been an exhausting day for everyone, and it wasn't over yet, though she had sent Bosacius to go sleep. He wouldn't be able to help with the next stage of things - they couldn't just *leave* that foul substance in the boy's body. It had to be dealt with, and sooner rather than later, given its appetite for his energies.

But not one of them was willing to traumatize Xiao further to do so. The level of pain he'd exhibited...the healer shuddered, and turned her mind from the too-fresh memory before she could be overwhelmed again. It was clear that crystal didn't just surround his nerves, it interacted with them in some way. So they couldn't work on the problem while he was awake. But no one wanted to risk more of his clearly horrific nightmares right now, either.

So Morax was in there ordering the child to drink a mug of broth, that was laced with a drug that would put him in a dreamless sleep for several hours. It was far from ideal, the stuff had nasty side effects if used too much, but once again her hand was forced by Xiao's circumstances.

She was *really* starting to hate being forced to choose risky treatments for the boy.

There was the sound of footsteps, and Madame Ping was surprised a moment later when it was Menogias that entered the kitchen, not Morax.

"I had expected you to need to rest longer, Menogias. Has your pain faded already?"

The yaksha rubbed briefly at his head, but it looked almost more habitual than pained.

"Mostly. Normally I *would* rest longer, to be sure, per your usual advice - but I saw something just as...things went wrong...that you should know."

The healer gestured for him to sit, and moved to make him some qingxin tea to help complete Menogias' recovery. If he was up, and willing, his help could be crucial tonight - but she wasn't going to make his own condition worse in the process if she could help it.

"What did you see?"

There was silence for a moment, and Madame Ping swore she could feel the geo yaksha's eyes on her back as she continued prepping his tea.

“When your probe reached the cryo structure, the structure reacted strongly, as you may have guessed. A pulse of power raced through the entirety of the structure from the point of contact, but also, a section a good fingerlength’s long around that same point seemed to crumble into crystalline sand. It did not dissipate, that I saw, but I was...overwhelmed...at that point, and had to turn away. I cannot imagine that sand is less than painful against Xiao’s nerves, but...if the structure is so easily destroyed, this might be a good sign, if we can find a way to then extract the sand without making things worse.”

The adeptus took the time to think about this, suppressing the too-recent memories of screams and turning over the information in her mind as the tea steeped, before returning to the table with a cup for each of them. She wasn’t prone to migraines herself; but while qingxin was wonderful at clearing away their aftereffects, it also promoted wakefulness and clarity of thought, and she could certainly use that right now.

“It’s good to know the thing is so fragile to the touch of my power, though the sand may actually be harder to remove safely than chunks of crystal, and harder to be certain of getting it all. I don’t suppose you saw anything to indicate *why* my probe had such a strong effect? If it was simply the presence of foreign power within his body, surely our feeding him our strength, or earlier probes and healing surges, should have had a similar effect.”

“I’m afraid not. I did not have much time to observe. If I had to guess...is it possible for such things to react to intent? As that time, you were actually aiming for it?”

“I...don’t know.”

Madame Ping sighed.

“That would be more Cloud Retainer’s area of expertise, if anyone’s. She at least studies the use of power in engineering...but I don’t know if she’s made a study of constructs made purely of power...the combination of elements you mentioned smacks of either a cooperative working, or alchemy, and I can’t think of anyone here who knows much of either. My own alchemy is highly specialized for healing purposes.”

It was Menogias’ turn to sigh.

“Am I right in thinking there’s no time to search for such a specialist, if they would even consent to come?”

“Yes, so don’t go distracting Morax with the idea. We’ll just have to try things until we figure out what works, I suppose. Would you - “

She cut off as footsteps sounded in the hall once more, and a very beaten-looking Morax joined them, speaking before he even looked up.

“He is asleep. Did you have any - “

He, too, cut off as he finally took in the scene.

“Menogias? Are you helping us tonight, then?”

Their lord was as blunt as ever, apparently.

“I was just about to ask if he was up to it, actually. Menogias, if you need more rest, we’ll understand. But especially if this...thing...reacts so strongly to my own attempts to observe it, your eyes would be invaluable.”

Menogias frowned, looking disconcerted for a moment, then lifted his half-empty cup of tea.

“Provide me with a steady supply of this, and I’ll gladly be your eyes. The sooner that construct is eradicated, the better. The thought of that horror existing in a living person is more worrying to me than the anticipation of another migraine, by far.”

Madame Ping nodded, then turned back to Morax.

“My lord, you look like you could use some rest...if you don’t want to go back to your own subspace tonight, you could use one of the patient rooms.”

“No, I...I could not rest properly, I think, under the circumstances. Both of you will have your hands full with other tasks, perhaps I could provide Xiao with a flow of power, should he need it at any point during the night? And...I could mind the tea...”

The healer blinked, and her eyes flicked to Menogias. It was unlike Morax to allow himself to sound so hesitant in front of anyone other than herself, Bosacius, and a couple others. Menogias was not on that list.

It was clear the old dragon was very disturbed by the little one’s plight. If he needed to help in some way, to set himself at more ease...well, it wasn’t as if the extra hands *wouldn’t* be useful.

“Alright. But I won’t need either of you right away, so you can both at least *try* to rest for the moment. It’ll take a bit for the sedative to take full effect, and I’ll be tending his more ordinary wounds in the meantime. Whatever we wind up doing about that foul structure will probably be hard on him, and the better shape he’s in before we start, the better he’s likely to handle it. I’ll come for you both when I’m ready to begin the main project of the night.”

It would also allow her to reassure herself the child truly was insensate. She had every confidence in her ability to mix medicines, and knew well how this one worked, but her hands still shook when she thought about what a simple *probe* had done to the boy.

Madame Ping left the room in a hurry, and told herself she wasn’t fleeing from the others. She just needed to get this healing done quickly, that’s all. The sedative would only last so long...and honestly, the same was true of her. For all her badgering of the others to rest, she herself had hardly been getting any sleep the last few days. Not that she begrudged it. She knew what she was signing up for when she decided to be a healer, and it was always worth it when a patient left her care healthy and well.

She tried hard not to think about the ones that didn’t, or the possibility - the increasing likelihood - that Xiao would be one of the latter.

Menogias wasn’t sure how long he was left in awkward silence with Lord Morax, but it felt like half the night before Madame Ping came for them. Well, awkward silence for him anyway, he doubted his lord even noticed - he seemed sunk in his own thoughts. Neither of them made any move to rest in a patient room as suggested, of course.

He was sure it wasn't *actually* half the night. They were working under a time limit, after all. But it felt like it.

When they got back to Xiao's room, the first thing the geo yaksha did was lean against the walls, close his eyes, and *focus*. Ignoring the throb behind his eyes - the qingxin hadn't *quite* been enough, and he knew his head would get worse before it got better, now - he brought his elemental sight back up to his fullest extent.

Then he took a deep breath, and stepped forward to take a look at the young adeptus lying in the bed.

As he pushed past the initial swirling layers of mostly-anemo, he found it much easier to see the full cryo structure with the child lying flat, or at least as much of it as he could see at one time. Anything too far from the current 'layer' he was viewing still tended to fade out. He looked carefully over what he remembered from earlier, trying to see if anything changed.

As soon as he saw Xiao's left arm, he knew there was a problem.

Menogias quickly stepped closer to the bedside, staring intently, moving back and forth from layer to layer with his sight, hoping he was wrong, that he was looking in the wrong spot. Then he checked the other arm, just in case. The crystal structure was fully intact in both arms.

"We may have a problem."

The sounds of Madame Ping and Lord Morax setting things up for the night stopped abruptly.

"The portion of the structure that Madame Ping's probe damaged is completely repaired. There is no sign the damage ever happened in the first place."

The silence continued for a moment, then Madame Ping spoke up.

"I hate to ask, but...given your state at the time...is it possible it never broke in the first place, and that my probe only pulsed power through the structure?"

Menogias suppressed the urge to grimace.

"I...it's possible. I'm fairly certain of what I perceived, but given the sudden and extreme onset of the migraine, my senses may have been a little scrambled for those few seconds. But if Xiao is truly unable to feel anything at this time, we don't have to rely on my memory. We can test it."

The healer let loose a shaky sigh, and her dendro-colored form moved into the edge of his vision as she stepped up to the bed herself.

"I suppose...this was the whole point of drugging him so thoroughly. We might as well start with repeating what triggered it last time. That way...we can be certain of how it reacts, and that the sedative is strong enough."

The geo yaksha watched carefully as Madame Ping extended a probe of dendro again, this time smaller and more delicate, barely more than a thread itself. Once again, as soon as it came in contact with the structure, a pulse of power lit up the structure, flowing quickly along all the root-like crystalline tubes. To his relief, the young adeptus didn't so much as twitch, and Menogias relaxed as he realized he'd tensed instinctively in anticipation of screaming and the resulting pain.

Once again, the cryo-and-geo crystal crumbled at the the point of impact, and this time he was able to keep watching it.

At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then, slowly, the swirls of muddled anemo started to swirl faster near the crystal sand, and it became clear they were getting sucked in. As Xiao's adeptal energy was sucked into the sand, at a much greater rate than the rest of the structure, it slowly, slowly, seemed to start melting back together, and after a time it became clear it was reforming its original shape.

"Well?"

Ah...of course. The others couldn't see any of this. Menogias swallowed.

"It crumbled to sand like last time, but in a smaller area. And...it's sucking up Xiao's energy at a greatly increased rate, in order to repair itself. It's not done yet, it's slow, but that's clearly what it's doing."

"How bad is it? Does he need supplementing?"

Why would Lord Morax ask him, that much at least should be able to be sensed directly - ah, right. It was hard to sense one significantly weaker than oneself in that much detail.

"Not yet, my lord, and at the current rate not for the repair of this piece. But I think he'll need it eventually, if this response is typical of what we find tonight, and we don't find a way to prevent it in the first couple tries."

He heard Madame Ping heave a sigh.

"Not really unexpected, all things considered, for all I'd hoped otherwise. Alright. First thing to try is to see if a shield between the crystal and his energy will prevent it from feeding on him. Menogias, you're the only one who can target that precisely..."

The geo yaksha nodded, and set about the slow, delicate task of forming a shield precisely coating the structure, as opposed to the usual simple globe. He'd made oddly shaped shields while helping Madame Ping before, it was nothing new - except in terms of complexity and precision. He was very careful not to actually *touch* the structure with the shield, just in case. It was not easy or quick, and by the time he was done the throbbing behind his eyes was beginning to force its way into his attention again.

It was obvious early on that shielding part of the structure didn't prevent the flow of energy, but he held out hope until the end - maybe it would work if it were completely encased - but no. his shield might as well not be there.

"The shield alone isn't making a difference. Before I dismiss it, would - "

He cut off for a moment as a particularly vicious throb distracted him, then resumed speaking.

" - would you like to test if it makes a difference in how it reacts to your probe?"

Menogias could practically *hear* Madame Ping frowning worriedly at him in her reply. Too much to hope she hadn't noticed, then.

"Yes, and then you will drink some qingxin tea. A full cup. You should probably take a break - "

The geo yaksha interrupted, even as he heard Lord Morax start getting the tea ready.

"No. I will drink the tea, as much as you like, but if I stop, if I turn down my sight, that will trigger the full force of the migraine. I should continue until we are done for the night, and surely we'll be

trying more than just this.”

He would’ve preferred to be more polite - Madame Ping was the one in charge at the moment, after all - but he only had so much attention to spare for words right now.

There was quiet for a moment, and he winced. Perhaps that had come out even harsher than he’d thought.

“Alright, then. If you’re sure. But if it gets to be too much, do let me know?”

Her voice was low, gentle.

“As always, Madame Ping.”

Well, he was always honest in his assessment of how bad his head was *after*, anyway. He couldn’t very well leave a duty half finished.

Unfortunately, shielding seemed to make no difference in how the structure reacted to Madame Ping’s probe. He dismissed the shield and drank his tea, and then observed and reported as she tried using a scalpel of power, designed to affect only elemental energies and constructs, next. It severed the crystal without harming the child’s flesh, certainly - and then a moment later a large section turned to sand and began devouring energy as it healed itself. Lord Morax handed him more tea and moved to begin feeding Xiao energy, and Menogias bemusedly watched the geo-colored swirls mixing smoothly with the anemo.

‘I wonder why it mixes in so easily...’

After a few minutes, Madame Ping was ready with the next thing to try, and the next. She didn’t always explain what she was doing, simply asking for the results. Time and again, they were the same. There was a pulse along the structure, a smaller or larger segment would crumble to sand, and it would begin sucking at the available energy in the young adeptus’ body to fuel its reconstruction. A couple of times, she had him or Lord Morax repeat her previous attempt themselves, but it made no difference the source or type of power, apparently.

The night passed incredibly slowly as attempt after attempt failed. Menogias’ head swam and he began to feel hot and cold by turns, and he knew he was going to have a true *monster* of a migraine when they stopped. It didn’t matter. If it saved a life - a *child’s* life - what was a little pain? He certainly risked more on the battlefield on a regular basis.

Finally, Madame Ping sighed and leaned back.

“I only have one more idea to try, for now. Menogias? You said before that this structure, while mostly cryo, contained threads of geo running through it, yes?”

He remembered just in time that nodding would be a bad idea.

“Yes. They are very fine, almost like roots grown within the roots, thinner than a hair in many places.”

The geo yaksha barely saw her nod in the corner of his vision.

“I think...those might be what hold the structure stable. Cryo alone *should* melt away in a living body. You’re the one who can see it clearly, and you wield geo...do you have the fine control to manipulate *just* those threads, without extending your own power to do so? To draw them out, so the cryo can, hopefully, melt? Perhaps if no *new* power approaches the structure, it won’t

crumble....”

It...might be workable. Menogias considered, and looked closely at one of the crumbled areas still rebuilding. Yes, the threads were intact even when it crumbled, he just hadn't noticed it before. Like they were the framework the sand rebuilt to.

“I can try. Don't interrupt me; I'll need all my focus for this.”

All he had left, anyway. He had to pause and blink a few times as the light from the lamp on the dresser seemed to grow bright as the sun, and mentally shoved his awareness of his physical condition down a deep dark hole. Just this one thing. Make it through this one, last attempt to solve the problem....

One of the fingers would probably be a good test area. If nothing else, starting at one of the edges would keep it from trying to repair from both ends, probably. Carefully, he stretched out his awareness, but not his power, until he was as viscerally aware of those little threads of geo as he would be of a rock in his palm. then he began to pull at them.

There was no pulse of power.

Nothing crumbled.

Encouraged, Menogias slowly drew the threads in that finger straight, then pulled them away from the crystal. He stopped for a moment, watching closely, but the structure didn't seem to react. Swallowing nervously - and trying not to notice how his stomach reacted to that - he drew those threads straight out at an angle, and then used a bit of his own power to cut them off where they were not only outside the structure, but outside Xiao's body, and hoped that was far enough not to trigger anything.

It was, apparently.

Slowly, like fibers drifting in calm air, the attached ends of the geo threads sank back down and into place. The part of the crystal that had been occupied by the threads he'd cut away, slowly, slowly, began to shimmer, melt, and fade away.

Then the familiar swirl of energy came, and the threads began to grow back, and the structure regrew what was lost.

Menogias sighed, and reported the results.

“Hmm. But it did, indeed, melt? And didn't react to your actions? Perhaps if we could draw it all out at once...”

Madame Ping's musings were interrupted as Xiao twitched and moaned slightly.

”...but that'll have to be done another time. The sedative is wearing off, and you, Menogias - “

She was interrupted a second time as a booming sound rang through the subspace three times, stopped, and three times again, the sound of the general alarm. Menogias nearly fainted immediately as the sound threw his migraine fully to the forefront, and he snapped out of his elemental sight almost painfully fast, struggling to hold on. He felt Madame Ping grab his arm to steady him, faintly heard Lord Morax say something - and knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

There you have it! Another cliffhanger, but a new chapter, at least?

Remember that comments provide authors with energy and inspiration!

Despair

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late update everyone!

TW this chapter: Panic attacks, despair, assumed character death, referenced torture, referenced slavery, implied mass murder

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Morax jerked and looked up instinctively as the alarm boomed out. Of all the timing...he cut off the flow of energy he was feeding Xiao, and got up to go see what was going on.

“My apologies, but I must see to this - “

He cut off as Menogias collapsed, and cursed quietly. He hadn't thought about how the alarm would affect his general, and he should have - he hesitated, looking from the young adeptus who was increasingly showing signs of waking, to Menogias, and to the door.

“Go, my lord. I've got things here.”

The god nodded gratefully to Madame Ping, and bolted for the door, hoping he wouldn't find a complete disaster outside. Since Madame Ping's subspace served as the hospital for the adepti and yaksha, she had it set to sound a general alarm for any incident that could generate wounded - but it didn't differentiate the types of alarms, as most of the others did. She always said she didn't want to alarm her patients overmuch.

He got through the passthrough in time to catch the young Pervases just before they crashed into each other.

“My Lord! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - “

“It is quite alright. What's the report?”

Pervases might be contracted as a yaksha, but he was still in training. None of the generals was comfortable with one so young on the battlefield unless absolutely necessary. As a result he often served as a message runner, a duty he took very seriously.

“Sinaria, one of Moharus' allies, is attacking from the south. Mostly humans, but some adepti as well, and a number of monsters, though we don't know how she's controlling them.”

“Is the god herself present?”

They spoke as they walked, quickly heading towards the Yaksha Pavilion.

“Not as far as we can tell.”

“How far have they gotten?”

“The scouts spotted them early. They aren't to our current borders yet, but they request

reinforcements before they get there, if possible.”

“A battle leader, too, I imagine. The scouts and borderwatch are not much used to working in large groups. Very well, please return quickly and inform them that help will be on the way as soon as possible.”

“Yes, my lord!”

...and off Pervases went, at full sprint. He would learn to conserve his energy eventually, but for now, it was useful in a battle runner. Morax shook his head and entered the Pavilion.

As expected, he found the other two generals, his marshal, and a number of the yaksha gearing up in the staging area. He beckoned to Bosacius and stepped to the other side of the path, out of the way.

“Lord Morax. What’s the plan?”

“Word is that the attackers are Sinaria’s forces, and coming from the south. As her lands are to the north, I have to assume this might be a feint. I want you to take a suitable number of yaksha south to deal with this incursion and command the defense initially from there, but keep up with news from any other fronts that may develop, and direct others as necessary. If I am right and she sends another push to split our forces, you can either have Bonanus take over for you and head to the new front, or send her there. Menogias is currently incapacitated. If Sinaria herself shows any sign of appearing at any time, send for me immediately. I will be resting, so that I will be combat ready should that eventuality occur.”

He didn’t need to get more specific than that; Bosacius was his marshal for a reason. He’d never encountered another with as solid a grasp of strategy and tactics, or as clear a head in battle.

“Understood. Let’s hope there’s no big surprises.”

His marshal hesitated a moment.

“Did you have any success with Xiao last night?”

“I...am not sure. Though towards the end, it sounded like they at least had a plan to try next time.”

Bosacius took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

“Could be worse, then. Alright. I have a battle to get ready for, and you have resting to do. I assume you’ve been up all night assisting Madame Ping.”

“I...yes. Good fortune, Bosacius, as always.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Morax watched for a moment as Bosacius began giving orders, then turned away. He truly did need to rest. It was always better to be in his best shape, when confronting another god.

There was something loud...then voices. Everything faded in and out, and it was hard to focus, to listen. But he had to listen, it was important, he had to know what was going on, how to react, he had to... *wake up*?

The realization that he was lying down, eyes closed, mind murky, hit like a bolt of lightning. Xiao tried desperately to move, to open his eyes, to do anything, but as far as he could tell nothing happened.

There was a soft thud, then more voices. This time he recognized the honorable one and Master Morax, but he couldn't understand what they were saying yet.

...Master Morax was present, and he was sleeping...or surely appeared to be....

Frantically, Xiao increased his efforts to move. He tried to ignore the deep throbbing pain everywhere, the way his left forearm and hand felt like they were on fire. He felt like he'd been being punished by the gem for hours, but why didn't he remember it? It didn't matter, he had to *wake up*, before he was punished for sleeping, *again*, because they were proper masters now, and he had to show he was ready to obey, he had to *wake up*...

His fingers twitched, and he redoubled his efforts, silently begging his body to respond. Inability was never an excuse, there was no such thing as an excuse, he *knew* that, he needed to *move*...

More twitches. Then his leg flopped, what felt like an eternity later, and his eyes snapped open. The paralysis disappeared as if it never was there to begin with.

Immediately, Xiao pulled himself from beneath the fabric covering him and sprang to the floor, folded into the approved posture, and waited, shaking.

Nothing happened.

...there were no other presences in the room...

...but he'd heard them, he knew he'd heard them...

Cautiously, he opened his eyes and sat up, looking around. The light of early morning shone through the window. Bandages and a bowl sat on the table by the bed. Otherwise, there was no sign that-

Footsteps.

Presence approaching.

Honorable one.

He bent low again, waiting.

The door opened.

"...Xiao?"

Steps nearer, then the shadows shifted at the edges of his vision.

Why did these people keep kneeling in front of him? It was so confusing. They hurt him, they punished him, they restrained him, but they kept insisting on lowering themselves around him. It

made no sense.

“Little one, please, you don’t need to do that. There’s no need to be afraid, I...I know you may not believe me, but I didn’t mean to hurt you before.”

What did she mean? It was punishment. Punishment he richly deserved. He had been very bad, in so many ways, since he was brought here. She was right, he didn’t believe her.

“There is...something...inside you, that is the reason you’re losing so much energy. I tried to take a look at it, and it hurt you in response. I’m so very - “

The wind teased at his ears, carrying voices. He couldn’t listen to both at the same time, and the lies of the honorable one hurt. She sounded so sincere, but he wouldn’t fall for that again. Maybe the voices on the wind would hurt less.

“...no sign of Alatus, my queen.” “Really? How...”

That second voice teased at his memory, but he couldn’t remember from where.

“...any success with Xiao last night?”

That...that was the one who had told stories.

He’d been wrong. The voices on the wind hurt *more*.

Xiao struggled not to let tears fall, to regain his focus. The breeze faded, and he realized honorable one was still talking.

” - guess...I’ll leave you alone for now. You should probably spend the day exploring the subspace, I don’t think you have properly yet, and you might be more comfortable knowing your environment. Just be back to your room by nightfall, alright?”

She sounded so sad, so defeated...he had to remind himself it was just a trick. She couldn’t betray him again if he didn’t trust her, if he expected it.

Oh. She expected a response.

“Yes, Honorable One.”

”...alright, then.”

He heard her get up, then leave and close the door. He didn’t move until her presence faded away in the usual direction, and stayed gone for a good while. Then Xiao slowly unfolded.

It wasn’t entirely clear whether ‘explore’ was an order, but being back on time certainly was. Best to look around anyway, just in case the first was too. That word...‘comfortable’...they always seemed upset when he didn’t immediately do what they said was ‘comfortable’. Maybe it was a keyword to signify orders here, rather than the definition he was used to. And...he still needed to find the place to dispose of his feathers and hair, before the filth attracted notice.

Cautiously, he stood and opened the door a crack. Then he paused and waited, listening and stretching his senses. Nothing. Good. It was always best not to attract notice, unless the master specifically called for you.

Moving as quietly as he could, Xiao padded off to explore.

He had never seen a place so confusing. Long hallways full of rooms near-identical to his own - well, the ones he'd checked. He remembered not to open the red ones. The kitchen he'd seen a couple times, two larger rooms that looked like gathering areas of some sort. The entryway, that he was pretty sure lead out of the...'subspace'. And the area outside, past the kitchen. He hadn't dared to explore far there, just the area immediately outside, as far as he'd gone to meet the new people, just before everything had gone sour.

He saw no sign of a proper furnace.

How did they dispose of dead bodies?

Master Moharus had a whole room of furnaces, and slaves whose whole job was to shovel bodies into them. Xiao had to work in there sometimes, and he'd always hated it, the heat, the smell of it, all those empty eyes staring at him accusingly. Surely a healer would have at least one, for the ones she couldn't save, or was told not to bother with.

Maybe it was behind one of the red doors.

He hoped not. Opening red doors was one of the few explicitly stated bad things, and he needed a furnace to dispose of the feathers and hair properly. If they didn't burn, no matter where he put them, they might be found, and then he'd be in trouble...

Xiao's frustrated musings were halted by the sound of voices around the corner. He immediately pressed against the wall, cursing himself for not paying better attention - then listened in. Any information might help in this confusing place...

"...tougher than expected, Sinaria's forces are putting up more of a fight than he thought they would. So Bosacius asked me to check in on Menogias and find out when he'll be recovered, before heading to the new front in the west. He thinks she's planning a three-pronged attack, and would prefer Menogias ready in the north, if he's better."

That was gentle one...he wondered if she was lying too, when she got on the ground with him. Then the sense of the words got through to him, and he froze.

Sinaria? Mighty one was fighting Sinaria?

An empty pit formed inside his gut, threatening to devour him whole.

'No. No no nonono....'

"Unfortunately, he's still unconscious, and if he does wake, and is willing, he is crucial for dealing with Xiao tonight...is there no other option? Even if he's up for that much, that's a far cry from being in shape for battle..."

"I'll talk to Bosacius. Knowing him, he probably has excessive backup ideas..."

The voices and presences faded away down the hall, and Xiao's knees gave out. This...this was a nightmare. History was repeating itself, or was it just the universe's way of punishing him? Was everyone who helped him doomed to be tormented and die? He...he couldn't...

He remembered the months, years after the first mighty one took his place. The hole that never

filled, the guilt, the rumors about what happened to him after that...the pain in his chest that never went away, not for longer than he knew for sure, not until he managed to hide the memory from himself, forget anyone had ever cared.

But he remembered now.

He remembered because there was another mighty one.

A mighty one who he thought had betrayed him....but what if he hadn't?

What if he was out there, fighting against the one who had taken the last mighty one away, one too strong for him to defeat, after Xiao had rejected his comfort, had pushed him away?

The pit grew, and with it the renewed pain in his chest.

The hours spent patiently telling him stories, why would he do that just as a trick? And he'd never been the one to cause pain directly...the time he'd held Xiao down, he said he was hurting himself, and he let go quickly...after the *punishment*, he'd held him only until Xiao pulled away, and then he'd let him go...

Was *Xiao* the traitor here?

Would this mighty one die thinking Xiao betrayed him?

He couldn't breathe.

He couldn't breathe.

He didn't remember making the decision to move, or the halls or kitchen - but suddenly he was under blue sky, and that helped, that helped, but he couldn't fly, and he couldn't be seen, so he found a bush by the wall and hid, and curled in on himself, and hid in his wings behind the bush and prayed he wouldn't be noticed as he cried, cried for another mighty one lost, cried for not understanding what he had until it was too late.

Eventually the changing light caught his attention, and he realized he needed to be back in his room. It was hard to get himself to move. He felt like there was a heavy weight tying him to the ground, but he had no choice. Just as he'd had no choice so many times before.

He wasn't sure when he'd dismissed his wings, but they weren't there now. Bloody feathers were scattered around him again. He collected them, then hesitated. If he carried them to stash them under the bed with the others, they'd probably be seen. So he dug a little hole and buried them under the bush. Maybe that would work for the others too, when he got a chance.

He walked back to his room slowly, feet dragging a little. What did it matter if he was punished for being late? Or for being untidy, or in the way...nothing they did could match the existing hurt, now.

He wasn't sure he could hide the memories again.

He wasn't sure he wanted to.

He didn't bother sensing ahead when he got to his room. When he pushed open the door, they were

waiting for him.

Honorable one. Master Morax. And solid one.

Solid one?

He remembered the rest of the conversation he'd overheard - they needed the solid one to 'deal with him tonight' - he saw the mug waiting on the table, and remembered how quickly he'd passed out the night before. How he'd ached and throbbed and burned when he woke up.

He started to shake.

Maybe they couldn't match the hurt inside, but he realized he didn't actually want to hurt *outside*, either. Even if he deserved it.

But he did deserve it, so he threw himself down before them, prostrating himself properly.

"Xiao? What..."

"This one apologizes profusely for keeping the great ones and Master waiting. This one will not fail to be ready again."

"Xiao. You have done nothing wrong. Please sit up."

He didn't believe Master, but he had to obey him. He sat up.

"Did you have a good day, Xiao?"

"This one explored his surroundings as ordered, Master."

He had, as far as he dared. They didn't need to know that it had only taken up half the day.

"I...did you *enjoy* exploring?"

"This one does not understand."

There was a silence, and then a sigh that seemed to come from three throats simultaneously.

"Alright. Please sit on the bed, Xiao, and drink your broth. I know you do not think you require it, but drink it anyway."

He quietly stood and sat on the bed, studiously ignoring the ominous, silent presence of the other two in the room. What had been done to him last night? How were they going to 'deal with' him tonight? He took the mug of broth and stared at it for a moment, shaking harder.

Whatever they did, he deserved it. For turning away from the mighty one. For being so weak the first one felt the need to protect him. For all those he'd been too weak to keep Master Moharus from killing with his body, and all those he'd killed without forcing his master into direct control. For all those whose dreams he'd eaten, leaving behind empty husks.

Xiao closed his eyes and drank.

Menogias wished he knew why Xiao looked so terrified when he saw the three of them waiting for him. The last thing he wanted was to scare the child, though he supposed that might be inevitable until they could get him to trust again - and there were other priorities right now. Like getting him to the point where he could stay alive without dangerous infusions of energy from others.

Despite his obvious fear, it was surprisingly easy for Lord Morax to get the kid to drink his broth and lie down. He wasn't sure if that made things better or worse, but it certainly made them faster, which was good. He was pretty sure he couldn't last a whole night, like before. Once they were sure Xiao was asleep, Lord Morax once again moved to the head of the bed, ready to feed the child energy. Madame Ping stayed to one side, ready should something go wrong. And as planned, Menogias moved to the foot of the bed to begin.

The plan was to begin at the extremities, gently pulling loose the threads of geo from there, and holding them up without cutting them, slowly and carefully pulling them out of the entire structure. It required fine senses and control; if he missed a thread, if he snapped one, it probably would all be to do over again. It was going to be exhausting, and take every ounce of skill he possessed.

What he hadn't anticipated was the tediousness.

Hour after hour, scouring every inch of limb with his elemental sight, holding the threads he'd already pulled carefully out of the boy's body, making sure he missed nothing as he oh-so-gently tugged the strands free. Hour after hour of blinking sweat out of his eyes and ignoring his throbbing head, hands gesturing in mimic of what he did with mind and power alone. It was bad form, but helped him focus.

He was so, so careful with the threads in Xiao's head. They reached into his brain, and he was afraid at first that they would damage it coming out, but just like everywhere else, they acted as though the flesh didn't exist.

With only the torso left, the geo yaksha slowed down. The top layers were easy, but he was so tired, and the threads he'd already gathered felt almost slippery in his mental grasp, as though his power was somehow sweating too. As he got closer to the child's back, the threads coalesced into two bundles, both of which he had a hard time focusing on. He was so tired...were they rooted in his lungs? That seemed strange, but what about this wasn't...

Those two bundles didn't want to come loose, blurred in his vision as he struggled to keep up his elemental sight. Maybe because they were the last, they were more attached. Finally, in desperation, he took a firm grip and *yanked*.

They came loose, and all the threads he'd pulled dissolved into the air.

The melting that had already begun in the limbs continued into the torso, and it all melted away.

For a moment, he thought he'd done it, and it was all worth the pain and exhaustion -

Then it came back.

He cried out in horror as the crystal came growing back from where the two bundles had started, as it twined around Xiao's nerves with greater speed than before, almost instantly sucking away all the energy available to do so. The sudden change must have been enough for even Lord Morax to feel, because Menogias saw a flood of geo enter the boy's system almost immediately, filling the gaps before his body could even react to the sudden lack. The structure continued to grow, sucking greedily at the god's donated energy until it was, once more, complete.

Menogias' knees hit the floor. His vision returned to grays as he shut off his elemental vision entirely, unable to look at that...thing...anymore. The migraine hit him like one of Lord Morax's meteors, but he stayed awake by force of will. The others couldn't *see* what had happened.

So he told them, tears on his cheeks, and tears ran tracks down theirs as well before he was done.

Then he stopped fighting the pain, and passed out for the third time in three days.

Chapter End Notes

Don't kill me! I promise fluff next chapter!

Sleep deep and dream well, everyone!

Edit because I'm an idiot and forgot: I told myself that if this story reached certain stats, I would ask if you guys wanted a discord server. It's pretty much there, so I put the question to you: Do you want a place on discord for discussing my fics, other fics, Genshin, etc, where there might occasionally be snippets and/or me asking your opinions on which sidestory to tackle first? If I get at least five comments saying you want it, I'll make it.

Winged Reunion

Chapter Notes

Alright everyone, you can thank my friend Crus for this chapter being early! They were rather insistent on my writing up the fluff asap, so I used it as a bribe to get them to post their own awesome story (seriously, when you're done here, go check it out! It's called "Where's My Damn Wine? (It hasn't been invented yet.)"), and once it was mostly written up, I figured why leave the rest of you suffering longer than necessary?

This chapter was originally going to cover quite a bit more, but Bosacius stuck his hand in again, and I was going to have to split it into at least two anyway as a result...so this segment's a bit shorter, sorry.

Trigger warnings for this chapter are...virtually nonexistent? There's some quickly-averted panic attacks, some low selfesteem, and the inevitable references to Xiao's past, and that's about it, I think. 'Tis a fluff chapter, mostly.

When Xiao woke this time, he knew what to expect. He didn't panic that he'd been asleep, or that he couldn't move, however he tried. He ignored the increased pain throughout his body, the bone-deep exhaustion. It didn't matter.

The mighty one wasn't coming back.

No one had said so yet. But he had been fighting Sinaria, and Sinaria was worse than Master Moharus. No one survived Sinaria, not for long. And from what he'd heard, they all shattered long before they died, all nothing more than shades of themselves when they breathed their last, souls ground to dust.

He didn't want that happening to the new mighty one. To Bosacius.

But he couldn't stop it.

It was almost certainly already too late, even if he *could* do something.

Xiao's face was cold, and he realized both that he was crying and that he could move as his hand automatically wiped away the evidence.

There was no one in the room with him, this time. No voices, no presences, and he opened his eyes to be extra sure. He was alone.

Slowly, he sat up, not sure what he was supposed to do. He still didn't have any standing duties...perhaps they would be pleased if he neaten up the room? He got out of the bed, and spent some time doing his best to make it look the same as the beds in the other rooms. Once he finished, he looked around, but nothing else looked out of place.

There was nothing else to distract him, and the pit yawned wide.

No. No, there was still the feathers, and the hair, under the bed. He could take them and bury them under that bush. He knelt quickly and started gathering the detritus into his hands.

Something teased the edge of his senses, and he slowed, then froze entirely, not believing what they told him.

There was a presence coming. A familiar, electro presence, a presence he had thought gone forever -

Something fluttered in Xiao's chest, and he tried to tell himself that he was imagining things, that it must be some other powerful wielder of electro -

Then the door opened, and Xiao shook, and felt his mouth open in a strange way that hurt, and he was crying and he didn't know why because he was *happy* -

The mighty one was alive.

Bosacius was alive!

Sinaria's forces had been tougher than Bosacius expected, but apparently she was no strategist. The expected third prong had never materialized, and by the time night fell they had successfully dealt with the attacks in the south and west.

There were no prisoners to deal with; Sinaria's soldiers fought fanatically, to the death, much like Moharus' had.

He'd sent Bonanus home to rest after the battles were over, but he and a squad of better-rested yaksha stayed up to keep an eye on the north, in case she thought to attack under cover of darkness. Nothing happened. So he ordered the borderguard doubled for the next week, told the scouts to be extra sharp, and went home, more than ready to rest. Unfortunately, he found a message waiting.

Apparently, whatever they'd been trying to cure Xiao had failed, and Menogias, Madame Ping, and Lord Morax were sleeping off the resulting exhaustion from whatever had gone wrong. Madame Ping asked that the yaksha healers tend to their own until mid-morning, unless there were any particularly dire cases, and that he check on Xiao when he returned.

Bosacius wasn't sure why she asked the last part. It was abundantly clear the little whirlwind didn't trust him anymore, and showing up fresh from battle seemed unlikely to fix that, he hardly looked gentle at the moment. Maybe they just wanted someone to make sure there had been no ill effects?

He certainly didn't mind seeing the kid again. He'd been worried, was if anything more worried after that message. But it hurt to see the way the kid was now, and it probably hurt Xiao to see him now, too, since the lack of trust made it clear he thought Bosacius had betrayed him.

He'd just have to trust Madame Ping.

The marshal checked with his healers, making sure they knew what to do. They'd already heard, but it was always best to check. Tired minds make mistakes, and given the scrawl on the message,

Madame Ping had been beyond exhausted. He really wasn't much better himself, but one thing at a time.

The path between the Pavilion and Madame Ping's seemed longer than ever, and for a moment, he regretted not taking off his armor first. Only a moment; the electro yaksha knew well that if he'd taken the time to do so, the relief likely would have put him out like a torch dunked in water. He focused on putting one foot in front of the other. One task left. Hopefully the little whirlwind would be asleep, and he wouldn't have to see him looking so defeated, as the kid had been when he left. He missed the trust, the spark, the courage that had been so evident when they'd met...

The dark teal door waited, same as it had been before, halfway down the central hallway, on the right. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then pushed the door open.

Xiao was sitting by the bed, his hands full of something, and Bosacius got a glimpse of what he swore was incredulous joy on the kid's face before the whirlwind was gone and something impacted him hard enough to drive the breath from his lungs. Blinking, he looked down, to find a head of teal hair and arms tight around his waist.

"Xiao?"

The little form shook against him, and he realized the little whirlwind was sobbing.

"Little whirlwind, what's wrong?"

Xiao shook his head and gripped Bosacius tighter. If he'd ever forgotten the kid was a warrior, he wasn't likely to now - it was getting hard to breathe.

"Nothing's wrong. You're alive! You're here...I...I thought you were dead and you're *here*..."

The kid's words deteriorated as he started to hiccup, still crying, and Bosacius swiftly knelt and wrapped the little whirlwind in a four-armed hug. Xiao didn't resist, shifting his grip higher without comment.

"I'm here. I wasn't even badly hurt, I promise."

How had the kid even heard he was in a battle? *If* that was what he was referring to...he'd ask, in a bit, but the little whirlwind - *his* little whirlwind, again, and it felt like getting family back somehow - was clearly in no state to talk right now. So he stayed kneeling, holding him and letting him cry it out.

His eyes strayed past Xiao into the room behind him, and his gut suddenly felt cold as he saw what the kid had been holding, and clearly dropped on the way to...hug was too gentle a term. *Attach* to him. Perhaps *tackle* -

He'd been holding feathers. Feathers that looked like they were dipped in dried blood. Feathers that didn't match the coloring of any bird adepti he knew.

The electro yaksha swallowed, and held the kid a little tighter. Where were *his* feathers? They didn't know Xiao's true form yet, it hadn't been in any of the reports and they'd had more important things to worry about than pestering him about something some adepti considered a private matter...But that dried blood. If Xiao was injured on a body part none of them even knew *existed*, they needed to know. *Madame Ping* needed to know, so she could heal him.

It explained so much. Why he was so twitchy about his back, the rip in his shirt...but he was getting ahead of himself. It was just a guess. And...asking would be tricky...he wasn't sure why his

little whirlwind trusted him again, he didn't want to lose that pushing him on an obviously sensitive topic...

So. One thing at a time. Start with the easier topic first.

Eventually, the kid's sobs slowed, and his shaking faded. Bosacius loosened his grip and leaned back a bit, to look down at him properly.

"Little whirlwind? Why did you think I was dead?"

A sniffle, and to his immense relief Xiao looked up to meet his eyes.

"I...this one heard the gentle one say you were fighting S-Sinaria..."

He would have to have a talk with Bonanus, apparently.

"You are a warrior, as I am. Surely you know a battle doesn't necessarily, or even usually, mean a particular warrior will die. Or did you have so little faith in my strength?"

Those golden eyes widened, then the boy looked down again.

"No! It's just...S-Sinaria is worse than Master M-Moharus. Everyone always said so, and no one ever su-survives her l-long, and I've never h-heard of her *losing*, and she's a *god*, a-and you're *not*, and sh-she k-killed the *other* m-mighty one, and..."

The little whirlwind broke down in sobs again, and Bosacius held him close. Well, there were his suspicions about the 'mighty one' title not being unique to him confirmed...though it sounded like the former holder of it had been important to the kid, too.

Worse than Moharus...he'd need to have a talk with Morax too. There were rumors, and they knew she'd been an ally of Moharus, but there were nasty rumors about *all* the gods, Morax included.

"Shhh. Don't worry. I'm fine, everyone's fine, it was a hard-fought battle but we didn't even lose any yaksha. And Sinaria wasn't even there, just her forces."

"Sh-she wasn't?"

"No. And if she was, I wouldn't have confronted her directly. We all know to leave the gods themselves to Lord Morax. You don't need to worry about me or anyone else here being caught by her."

A long moment, then he felt Xiao nod against his chest. As the yaksha waited for him to calm down the rest of the way, he wondered if he should leave the other topic for later. The kid had been through enough this morning. His eyes wandered back to the feathers.

No, he couldn't put it off. There was no telling from those feathers how badly the kid might still be bleeding. Hiding away a body part didn't erase the damage, and it didn't stop it from existing. It wasn't a true shapechange, it was the origin of the adepti ability to create subspaces. He remembered all too clearly the lecture he'd gotten when he'd hidden away one of his lower arms so he couldn't feel a gash, and passed out from blood loss.

Madame Ping could be terrifying when she wanted to be....

Gradually, the small body he held stopped shaking, and the audible sobs stopped. Bosacius heaved a sigh, and hoped he didn't lose the trust he'd just regained in the next few minutes. He'd be

careful, but there was only so much he could dodge around the real question.

“Little whirlwind, where did those feathers come from?”

That small body was suddenly still as stone.

And as silent.

The yaksha let go of him and sat back on his heels, putting him at Xiao’s eye level. As he’d rather expected, those golden eyes were now firmly on the floor.

“Are they yours? I don’t recognize the coloring, but parts of them match your hair.”

He was trembling again, and Bosacius winced internally. He really wished he didn’t have to do this right now.

“This one is sorry.”

He was back to ‘this one’, and Bosacius was pretty sure now it wasn’t an affectation, like it was for Cloud Retainer and some of the others.

“What are you sorry for?”

“This one has made a mess. This one will clean up its filth.”

He closed his eyes as the words seemed to stab at him, then opened them again, seeking eye contact. When the little whirlwind kept his eyes down, the yaksha took a chance and gently lifted his chin with one hand.

“Xiao, please look at me...that’s not what I meant at all. You aren’t in trouble. I’m worried you’re hurt.”

Golden eyes rose once more, searching his face before meeting his own.

“Why?”

“I care about you. I don’t want to see you hurt, and if you *are* hurt, I want to help you get better.”

“But...why? This one doesn’t matter...”

That...he knew that was likely too deeply rooted an issue to tackle right now. What was another angle?

“You mentioned another mighty one before, and it sounded like you cared about him. Did he care about you?”

The little whirlwind’s face crumpled, and he regretted the question. But he really couldn’t think of another way around this right now, and if he had wings, and they were bleeding....

“Y-yes. At least...I-this one thinks so. He protected me, and tried to get me to eat, and tried to argue with M-master Moharus about my punishment even when it got *him* punished too, a-and h-he t-took my p-place when I w-was to be s-sent to S-sinaria, even though I didn’t *want* him to, and I still d-don’t *understand*...”

Bosacius wrapped the little whirlwind in another hug before he could devolve entirely, and struggled to keep from crying himself. He needed to be strong for the kid. It was hard, though, with

the exhaustion of a day of battle and a night of watch weighing on him...and he found it was hard to speak past the lump in his throat, too.

“Is it so hard to believe that I would care, too? Even if you don’t understand why, yet, can you accept that it’s true?”

Sniffles, then a few moments silence.

”...maybe. At least...this one will try...if that’s what you want...”

He held the boy tighter for a moment. What he *wanted*.... he wanted Xiao to be healthy, and happy, and to have a childhood. But all of that would take time, and it might be too late for much of the last.

This, at least, could be a start.

“Yes. That’s what I want.”

They stayed that way for a bit, then he felt the kid tense up, and let go to give him space. He didn’t know for sure why the little whirlwind had been so accepting of - and even initiating - physical comfort, though he was developing suspicions, but he wasn’t going to push it. Even if the kid still wanted and needed it, Bosacius knew Xiao had been through a long, long time where every touch was painful, and it would take time to rewrite those reactions.

“I...I have wings.”

Oh. It wasn’t the hug. He was working up courage.

“Are they hurt?”

“They always hurt. E-everything does.”

The yaksha closed his eyes and swallowed. They’d suspected as much, but he hadn’t expected the kid to admit it so soon.

Damn, the kid was powerful. He could *feel* the way the young warrior’s full attention focused on him. There weren’t many who could make their presence known that solidly. He opened his eyes to meet the whirlwind’s.

“Is that not...normal? Is this one not supposed to be in pain?”

“No, little whirlwind. You are not supposed to be in pain. That is what we’ve been trying to fix.”

“But what Master Morax, the honorable one, and the solid one do *causes* this one pain.”

He closed his eyes again for a moment, struggling to keep his face neutral and reassuring. It was going to devastate Madame Ping when she learned...

“Did you tell them it hurt?”

“Showing pain means more pain, showing weakness means it being used against this one.”

He said that like it was a self-evident truth...the yaksha reminded himself that many of the former human slaves said similar things, that they’d learned otherwise, had healed...but he was so very *tired*, it was hard not to let the words and the conviction with which they were said tear his heart to shreds.

“Then, if you didn’t tell them, or show that you hurt, is it possible they didn’t know they were hurting you?”

“How could they not know punishment hurts?”

...this conversation was going nowhere fast. But he couldn’t just dismiss the kid’s questions and confusion...

“Perhaps they didn’t see it as punishment. Sometimes, to heal, you have to hurt - like when you straighten a broken bone. It won’t heal right if you don’t do it, but straightening the bone can hurt more than the initial break sometimes. A healer will usually do what they can to dull the pain - but if they don’t know the pain is there, they don’t know to try to prevent it.”

Xiao practically radiated doubt, but didn’t say anything.

“Will you at least agree to tell *me* if something or someone hurts you? Then I can make sure it gets taken care of? And I’ll make sure Madame Ping knows to explain to you anything she does to help you, *before* she does it, so long as you’re conscious to hear the explanation, or as soon as you wake, otherwise?”

There was a long pause, and then Xiao gave a slow, careful nod, before searching Bosacius’ face again. He wondered what the kid was looking for.

“You...you want to see my wings.”

“Yes. I want to see if they’re injured. If your wings are bleeding while you have them hidden, you could bleed out and never even feel it, and I don’t want to lose you.”

His little whirlwind nodded and bit his lip. After a few seconds he took a few quick steps back, searched Bosacius’ face again, and summoned his wings.

Xiao didn’t want to summon his wings. The thought of anyone being present with his wings out filled him with terror and tied his gut in knots. But he didn’t want Bosacius to leave, he couldn’t lose him, couldn’t go through that again....so he would do what he asked.

Bosacius wouldn’t hurt him. He wouldn’t.

He didn’t want to play with them like Master Moharus. He wanted to make sure they weren’t hurt. Which...Xiao knew they were. It hadn’t been that long since the last time they’d been played with.

He took a deep breath, and stopped searching the mighty one’s face, looking down. He didn’t want to see his face when he saw his wings.

He summoned them, and heard a strangled gasp. He refused to look up.

It was...different, from when he summoned them to hide in, and was already sitting. Or when Master Moharus made him do it, and he was usually already lying on his belly so he’d have easier

access. The weight of them dragged at his shoulders and back, and as he unconsciously tried to twitch them higher, pain shot through the breaks he'd straightened only days before. He never noticed those when he was hiding in them either, somehow. Maybe because at such times the pain inside was too much to notice the outside. He knew it worked that way, sometimes.

Thinking about the differences was easier than thinking about whether the mighty one would change now that he'd seen them, seen the proof that he was a monster.

But he had four arms, and the gentle one had claws, and the bright one had fire for hair. Maybe they were monsters too, and wouldn't hold it against him?

Suddenly there was a hand touching his cheek, and he violently flinched away before realizing it was just Bosacius.

"Th-this one is sorry..."

"You don't need to apologize for hurting or being afraid, little whirlwind."

He sounded so sad...why would he sound sad?

Xiao saw the glint on the thumb of the mighty one's hand as he lowered it, and realized that he'd been wiping away Xiao's tears. He hadn't even realized he was crying, and now that he knew, he quickly wiped it away.

"I...I don't know much about wings, little whirlwind, but yours look to be in...bad shape. Would you let Madame Ping look at them, if I was there with you?"

He tensed up. He really didn't want to. The mighty one might mean well, but he wasn't convinced the honorable one did. He still hurt everywhere from whatever they'd done to him during the night.

But Bosacius wanted him to do this.

"You won't leave?"

"I'll be right there the whole time, I promise."

"...then this one will...try..."

Flashback and Discussion

Chapter Notes

Buckle up, this is a rough one...but this arc (arc, not fic) is almost done, so you'll get a break soon!

TW this chapter: Flashbacks, torture, graphic violence, breaking bones, panic, sadism. Most of this is in the flashback itself and can be dodged by skipping the big italicized section.

There was no sleeping through the pounding on Madame Ping's door. She groaned. She'd *told* them to let her be until midmorning. She was *sure* she'd sent the message out before she collapsed into bed. If this wasn't something *dire*....

The healer stomped over to the door to her private quarters, fully prepared to deliver a scathing lecture as she yanked it open - and froze, as she realized the *last* pair of people she would have expected were waiting for her.

"Bosacius? Xiao? What - "

"Sorry, Madame Ping, I know you need your rest, but it turns out that Xiao has some rather severe injuries we didn't know about. Would you be willing to look them over now, and provide treatment for the worst of them, at least?"

"I - of course, but *where*? ...Nevermind, this is not a conversation for a doorway, I'm hardly going to examine him standing here. Come on in, or would you be more comfortable for us to do this back in your room, little one?"

Nevermind the shock of Xiao willingly standing at someone's side again rather than prostrating himself, or that he glanced up at the yaksha for confirmation before he spoke - what kind of miracle had Bosacius worked this time?!

Bosacius gave the little one an encouraging nod.

"This one has no opinion...but...red doors are forbidden?"

Oh.

Madame Ping smiled at the child and rested her hand on the door for a moment, willing it to return to the usual sandbearer brown.

"These are my private rooms, so yes, they are not normally a place you would be permitted to wander. But I have invited you in, so it is alright for now."

She stepped back to give the two room to enter, and carefully watched Xiao as he walked for any sign of the reported injuries. It was saddening, but not surprising, that the young adeptus gave her as wide a berth as possible as he entered her private hallway. However, while he was visibly trembling, he didn't move in any way that would indicate injury.

But then, he hadn't before she'd healed the majority of the fresh wounds he'd arrived with, either. And he still showed no sign of acknowledging the older damage, that she could do so little about with just her powers.

The healer gestured towards the first of the two doors in the hall.

"That's my sitting room. It should provide ample space and privacy."

She followed a few steps behind as they went in, mind aswirl. The healer was quickly waking up, adrenaline was good at that...but what could she have missed? She'd directly healed all she could that first night they'd drugged him, before they started working on the strange structure around his nerves. She'd been *sure* they hadn't missed anything, for all much of it was too old to be healed that way.

Madame Ping was surprised when they didn't head for one of the couches or chairs, instead moving to the most open part of the room.

"Before we start, Madame Ping...I want you to promise that you'll explain to Xiao *what* you're doing, before you do it, any time you treat or examine him. If he is unconscious or otherwise unable to understand, you need to explain as soon as he is properly aware again. This should go a long way in helping him understand what is and isn't... *punishment*... and was one of the requirements to get him to agree to come to you now."

She felt like an idiot. She should have done that from the start.

"Of course. That's no problem at all. I'm sorry, little one. It didn't occur to me that would help."

The child didn't meet her eyes, and it was clear he still didn't trust her. But why would he? She'd been treating him like he had the mind of a human child as young as he appeared to be, and moreover one with caretakers who were the ones who should get the explanations. But he was an adeptus, who had survived an untenable situation for Celestia knew how long, and had a mind of his own, however little he expressed it, and who likely had no concept of what it was like to have someone taking care of him.

She was mortified.

She would do better.

"Where are your injuries, Xiao?"

The child seemed to shrink in on himself, shaking like a leaf. After a moment, Bosacius knelt in front of him, taking one of Xiao's hands in two of his own.

"It's alright, little whirlwind. I'm here, and I'm not going to let her, or anyone else, hurt you - "

"No!"

From the look on his face, the uncharacteristic outburst startled the yaksha as much as it did her. The young adeptus shot her a terrified glance before meeting Bosacius' eyes.

"I don't want you to protect me. I - this one just...don't leave? Please?"

Bosacius enveloped him in a hug, and Madame Ping had to work to swallow the lump in her throat. Miracles indeed. Speaking his mind, accepting physical affection...what had changed since the night before?

"I promised I would be here the whole time. That hasn't changed."

She didn't hear Xiao's response, if he made one, but she did hear the ragged breath he drew as he pulled away. He threw her another glance, took another deep breath, and there was a flash of light any adeptus would be familiar with...

Wings.

The boy had wings.

It hadn't been his lungs Menogias had seen those last threads leading to....

Then the shock passed and she *looked*, and she wanted to cry. What had been done to the rest of him had been bad enough, but it was immediately obvious that the worst of his treatment had been reserved for the poor child's wings. She had treated enough bird adepti to know how incredibly sensitive those limbs were, with a higher density of nerves to accurately feel the slightest change in the wind and adjust...and how important they were, psychologically.

These wings...she could only see part of them from here, but there were huge patches of missing feathers on the underwings, whole bald patches that looked *burned* that way on the back...swelling all along the bones, more obvious in the bald patches but severe enough to be visible even where covered with feathers...no pins anywhere. The feathers weren't growing back, and most of the primaries and secondaries were gone, in addition to those patches...some of which had been bleeding recently...scabs were visible here and there, most showing obvious signs of infection, and the remaining feathers looked filthy, caked in blood and who knew what else, matted together in the areas that should have been fluffy down at his apparent age...and that was just what she could see from here.

No wonder he reacted so strongly to being touched.

No wonder he was so terrified to be punished.

No wonder he'd hidden them for so long.

"Oh, child...I'm so sorry..."

He shuffled his feet.

"This one does not understand."

Of course he didn't.

"That's alright. Are there any places that hurt more than the rest, that you'd like me to see to first? Or would you prefer me to make my own examination, and treat your wounds accordingly?"

Xiao hesitates for a moment before answering.

"Th-this one *tried* to straighten them...but it's hard to reach..."

He gestures over his left shoulder, and almost touches the top of his right wing.

"The bones are broken?"

A nod like a stab to her heart. His wings were broken, and he'd tried to set them himself...it must have been an agony...Madame Ping walked closer, around behind him. The child shook harder, and she remembered her promise. Time to suppress her reactions and sound as professional as possible.

He was scared enough already.

“I need to get a better look, to see how bad the breaks are and whether they’re set properly. Normally I’d do a reading, but we haven’t gotten rid of that cryo structure in your body yet, and I would prefer not to risk setting it off again. A reading not aimed at it didn’t elsewhere, but there are a lot more nerves in wings, and the structure is probably much more densely packed through them as a result. Are you alright with me feeling for the breaks by hand, little one? It will hurt, but not nearly as much as if I set off the structure trying to probe the break with my power, I think.”

She was rambling a bit, honestly, but it seemed to help. The child’s shaking eased a bit as she spoke, and he gave a short nod.

“Alright, I’m going to touch you, now. I’m going to start with where your left wing joins your back, and feel along the bone until I find the break.”

He jumped when her fingers touched his bare back - it was obvious how the shirt got ripped, now - and his shaking grew more pronounced as she tried to feel the bone through the matted feathers near the wing’s base.

“You’re doing so well, sweetheart. I know this probably hurts. Would you like me to stop and get you something for the pain before we continue?”

He shook his head, his reply a shaky whisper.

“This one can bear it.”

She wished he’d agreed, but had suspected he wouldn’t. With a sigh, the healer continued to feel along the bone, talking - mostly mindless reassurances - as she slowly and carefully prodded. Nearly the whole area seemed swollen, and there were a number of ridges and bumps that she suspected marked old breaks that hadn’t healed well. None of them shifted beneath her questing fingers, so she continued on.

About two thirds of the way along the humerus, she found it. The break hadn’t even managed to reconnect yet, it shifted and ground at her touch - and immediately, Xiao cried out and convulsed.

From the first touch, Xiao was struggling to keep down panic. Memories pushed at his mind, time after time being held down while Moharus played with his wings. No one had ever touched his wings before, except to hurt them.

He listened to the honorable one’s promised words, and gripped Bosacius’ hands, and reminded himself over and over that the honorable one was going to help, that she was hurting him to heal him. That reminder might have worked better if he was sure she wasn’t punishing him on purpose before, but he managed to keep the memories and panic down, if only barely.

Then she got to the break, and he wasn’t in that room anymore, he was in Master Moharus’ playroom...

Hands were on him everywhere, holding him down with bruising force as he struggled. Any other time, Alatus would try to hide his fear and pain - but he never could where his wings were concerned. A shudder ran through him as Master laughed.

*“Please, Master, don’t...this one is loyal, this one hasn’t disobeyed you, this one behaves, **please!**”*

He was fairly certain he hadn’t done anything wrong recently at least...it was easy to be good when he wasn’t sent to pacify any villages or anything. It was when he was sent to eat dreams and kill and hurt that he had trouble obeying.

*“But you could be more eager, couldn’t you? Besides, it’s so **fun** to play with your wings...”*

He struggled not to cry. Master hadn’t even started yet, if he failed and wept this early things would be even worse...

“This lowly one will do better! Please! Have mercy!”

“Hmm....I think not.”

Alatus felt Master’s cold hands grip his left wing near the base, and his panic found new strength. He knew what was coming, and that was the hardest bone to reach, to straighten...

“Damnit, hold him still!”

“We’re trying, Master! He’s too strong!”

The hands left his wing, and then the hands holding him were yanked free and Alatus heard several thuds. He knew he shouldn’t move, but he couldn’t help it, he was in the corner whimpering before he could stop himself, wings wrapped around himself protectively, though he knew it was useless.

“Useless vermin.”

Alatus shrunk further under his wings, as he heard Master picking his way towards him. Then one of those cold hands grabbed his right wing and slammed it against the wall, and he couldn’t stop the cry of pain that leapt from his throat.

“You claim to be obedient, and yet you pull this?! You’ve lost me six good slaves, dog. Get back on that table.”

*He couldn’t. He **couldn’t**. It’d be even worse now, and he couldn’t make himself move...and then his body was moving for him, and he couldn’t stop the tears because he knew Master hated when he forced him to do that, and it was going to be so very, very much worse, he hadn’t been this bad in a long, long time...*

Alatus couldn’t do anything but feel and watch as his body obediently lay face-down on the table, wings spread wide for easy access. He couldn’t even flinch as Master put his hands back where he’d begun, and snapped the bone in one quick motion.

He could scream, though, and did.

*“Now that you’ve seen you gained **nothing** from that ridiculous show of yours, shall we see about*

the penalties for the show itself?"

The pain of the gem flooded his body, and by the time it stopped and Alatus was aware of the outside world again, Master was squatting in front of him with a torch and that awful, awful smile.

"Back with me again? Good."

*Master stood and moved out of Alatus' view, and he realized he was still being held still by Master's control. Then he smelled burning feathers, and there was **pain**...*

He wasn't sure how long it had been when the door opened and an out of breath slave interrupted Master's play to inform him of an attack. Master cursed, and the control over Alatus' body was suddenly released.

"Clean yourself up and get a spear. You know your place."

...and Master was gone. He hesitated a moment. He'd have to be quick, but he knew it'd hurt less if he could straighten the bones now, instead of later...Alatus twisted and stretched and strained, and tried not to whimper or cry out, until he thought they were straight. Then he dismissed his wings, rebraided his hair, and headed out to join the defense.

There were hands holding his face, and a voice was saying something he couldn't quite make out over someone screaming. There was something big and blurry close to his face, and he tried to jab with his spear, but the spear wasn't there, so he tried to jerk back, but the hands held him steady, and he couldn't get his head free and *he couldn't get away* and then the face came into focus and he knew it wasn't scary but couldn't place it, but why wasn't it scary when he remembered fighting the person with that face, remembered a big sword pinning him to the wall...

He realized he was the one screaming, and stopped, and then he was able to hear the words. It took a moment longer to understand them.

"...you're safe, little whirlwind, it isn't real. You're in Madame Ping's sitting room. Little whirlwind, Xiao, please listen to me, oh *gods* please hear me, you're safe, you're safe, no one's hurting you or going to, what you're seeing isn't real, it's a memory..."

Xiao? Oh, right. He wasn't Alatus anymore. And...this was Bosacius...they had fought after he'd joined the defense that day, but Master Morax had won, and they'd made a 'contract', and Bosacius told him stories...

"...Bosacius?"

The face disappeared from view and suddenly he was being held tightly, but he wasn't afraid. It felt...warm, and safe.

He was still confused and scared, but memories were starting to slot into place.

The rather solid punch stuttered Bosacius' breathing, but he didn't let go and didn't stop his litany of frantic reassurances. He wished he could do more, he *hated* having to just watch and wait and try to get through while the little whirlwind was clearly in so much pain, experiencing something terrifying...he hated the pleas that occasionally interrupted the desperate screams, and he had given up on trying not to weep before long. The punch had come as a bit of a relief, despite the strength behind it, because maybe it meant that the kid recognized that there was someone in front of him, maybe he was coming out of it...

He wished that the kid could catch a break. It seemed like every time anyone around him *moved*, Xiao paid for it in some terrible way.

The screams stopped, but his little whirlwind still didn't seem to be responding properly, so he kept it up, telling him that he was safe, that what he was experiencing was only a memory, that it wasn't real and no one was going to hurt him. Slowly his eyes lost that far away look, slowly the panic and pain faded from Xiao's face, until a confused whisper escaped his lips.

"...Bosacius?"

The yaksha swallowed a sob and swallowed the kid in a hug, careful to avoid his wings.

"Yes, it's me. You're safe, Xiao. We'll find another way to heal your wings. You're safe and no one's going to touch them, alright?"

Xiao hesitantly nodded into his chest, and the two simply stayed like that for awhile, taking comfort in each other's living presence.

A few hours later, Bosacius bid good rest to Madame Ping from the hallway outside Xiao's door. Talking there had been a compromise; Madame Ping didn't want to risk setting the little whirlwind off again with her presence in his room, and the kid apparently really didn't want Bosacius out of his sight. And no one wanted to keep information from Xiao at this point. So they'd discussed treatment possibilities just outside the door, where Madame Ping was out of sight, but Bosacius was easily close enough for Xiao to sense his presence, and where he could listen in if he wanted to.

He rubbed his eyes for a moment before heading back in, and then his temples. He needed rest too, badly, but Xiao needed him more, and he wasn't going to abandon the kid just because he was tired. Exhausted. Whatever.

The kid had enough to deal with, and went straight to the edge of panic any time he thought Bosacius might leave. So here he'd stay, for now.

The yaksha opened the door, and smiled at the little whirlwind where he'd been sitting on the bed.

"How much did you hear?"

The kid hesitated a moment before answering.

“Some. But this one didn’t understand much of it.”

He nodded and sat next to him.

“Would you like me to start at the beginning, then? And you can ask any questions you like, if you don’t understand something.”

His whirlwind nodded, so he paused for a moment to collect his thoughts, and started summarizing Madame Ping’s frankly too technical explanation.

“I don’t know if you remember much - you were pretty out of it at the time - but a couple days ago, while trying to figure out what was happening with your adeptal energy, Menogias and Madame Ping found a power structure in your body, and accidentally set it off. This freaked everyone out, so they decided to try to work on removing it while you were in a drugged, dreamless sleep, so you hopefully wouldn’t feel it if they messed up. From what you’ve said, that didn’t *completely* work...but Madame Ping still doesn’t see a better option for dealing with the structure. And she thinks they can, now that they know about your wings, since last time it grew back from that part of your back.”

“The structure is real? It w-wasn’t just an excuse?”

“It’s real. Madame Ping never meant to hurt you like that, she broke down in the hall afterwards.”

She probably wouldn’t appreciate him saying that, but it had the intended effect. While he still seemed doubtful, Xiao seemed to be thinking about his words. Maybe it would help him trust her, one day.

“Why is it still there? Sh-shouldn’t it have gone away when M-master Moharus died, like the gem?”

“We don’t know, but Madame Ping said something about...threads of geo? I don’t really understand it, honestly. I’ve never messed much with alchemy and such. But she said something about the geo keeping it stable, and that it melted away when the geo was removed, but grew back if there was any left. She thinks it’s the growing back that leaves you hurting after, and that if they succeed you shouldn’t hurt like that again.”

“W-what about...”

It wasn’t hard to guess what he was trying to ask, when the kid shrunk into himself that way.

“Your wings?”

Xiao nodded, staring at his knees.

“Given your reaction this morning, Madame Ping was thinking the least stressful option would be for her to do all the healing she can as soon as Menogias got your wings free of the structure, while you’re still asleep. That way you wouldn’t be aware to *get* flashbacks, and you’d just wake up with your wings feeling a whole lot better. And hopefully, if the whole thing works, feeling better in general, and with more energy. But if you don’t think you can do this, they’ll *try* to find another way - though she warned me there might not be another one that would spare you the pain of the process.”

The little whirlwind was silent for a long moment, and Bosacius gave him time to think. This had to be terrifying for the kid, and on top of that, Xiao wasn’t use to making his own decisions. It might take him awhile to make up his mind.

“Will you be there?”

“I’ll sit right there in the chair by your bed the whole night.”

Another long silence.

“I...I’ll try.”

She paused on the way back from patrol to glare at the entrance to Madame Ping’s. The marshal was probably still in there, toadying to that *demon* instead of getting the rest he sorely needed or tending to his *actual* duties. She’d heard General Kapisas had been in there for the last two days as well, and that he’d been too hurt to join in the defense yesterday. Undoubtedly the demon’s doing, as well.

It was absurd how easily the thing had wrapped their leadership around its fingers, and worrying. As she strode onwards back to the Pavilion, Yanlais could only hope they all came to their senses soon.

Cures and Overdoses

Chapter Notes

TW this chapter: overdosing, drunk/high behavior, self loathing, slavery

Fair warning, *both* Bosacius *and* Xiao decided to derail things towards the end of this chapter...-sighs-

“This is your choice, little whirlwind. If you need to wait, or can’t do it this way, I’ll talk to Madame Ping.”

Xiao sat in front of him on the bed, tense as a rock and staring at the mug in his hands. From the look on his face, the kid still wasn’t sure whether to believe this was all to heal him - he looked like a warrior who knew he was heading out on a suicide mission. Bosacius was glad he’d had the foresight to ask the other three to wait in the hall until Xiao was asleep. The added pressure of their presences - especially Morax’s - would not be a help right now.

“You’ll be here, right?”

The same question had been asked at least twice an hour all afternoon and evening. The yaksha struggled to fight down the annoyance that tinged his concern. He reminded himself that exhaustion decreased patience, and that he wouldn’t normally be irritated.

“I won’t move from this chair until you’re awake again.”

Frankly, he’d be asleep in the chair moments after they started, probably.

The little whirlwind’s head snapped up and searched his face, and he cursed internally. The kid was entirely too good at picking up on certain emotions. It was for good reason, probably, but trying to explain that the existence of those emotions didn’t necessarily mean that *he’d* done anything wrong was likely to be an exercise in futility at the moment...

Luckily, whatever he saw there seemed to satisfy him, and his gaze moved back to the mug.

“I-I can do it. I *will* do it. I’m...this one is just...”

Bosacius wasn’t about to make the suddenly-trembling kid force out that last word. He knew what Xiao was trying to say. He leaned forward and plucked the mug from shaking hands, setting it on the table while using the rest of his arms to wrap the little whirlwind in a gentle hug.

“Take the time you need. I know this is hard.”

The small, bony pile of Xiao in his arms shuddered, and the yaksha held still, letting him remain in his arms as long as he needed to. After a few minutes, when the shaking became less pronounced, he spoke gently.

“Is there anything else we can do to make this easier for you?”

Silence, for a long moment. Xiao glanced sharply at the bed, then looked down.

“C-could this one... *not* lie on my front? I...I know my wings have to be out, or they can’t be fixed, b-but...that’s the position *H-He* made me take w-when h-he...”

Bosacius’ gut twisted. No wonder he was having so much trouble.

“Well, why don’t you summon your wings, and we’ll try to find another workable position, then? And then once you’re settled, I’ll bring you the broth, and the next thing you’ll know it’ll be morning, and you’ll hopefully be feeling much better.”

No matter how certain Madame Ping and Menogias seemed that it would work this time, he wasn’t about to promise a certainty. This trust was still too new, and a promise like that falling through...he wasn’t going to risk anything that could break it, if he could help it.

His little whirlwind nodded, and they set about trying to find a less traumatic way for him to spend the night. On his back was out, obviously; he refused to let the kid even *try* that one. Various half-tilted angles that let his wings spread still prompted him to start shaking again. Finally they settled on an odd position with him lying on his side on the very edge of the bed, on the far side from Bosacius’ chair. This allowed the left wing to gently droop to the floor, and the right to drape over his arm and side to splay over the bed. With a pillow to hold onto through the night, it was relatively stable, and seemed unlikely to trigger any panic attacks.

It was awkward helping the kid to drink his broth from that angle, but they managed, and Bosacius sat in his chair and held one of Xiao’s hands until he was certain he was fully asleep.

He looked towards the door.

“You can come in now.”

Menogias grimaced at the qingxin wafers that filled the bowl he was carrying, but made himself start munching one anyway. Processed this way, qingxin was horrifically bitter, but he had to admit it was far more effective and faster-acting. Both of which would be necessary tonight. The tension in his face eased as it started to take effect, easing the migraine that still hadn’t gone away from the night before, for all it wasn’t threatening to knock him out anymore.

Madame Ping was right. Whether they succeeded or not, this would have to be the last attempt at this kind of solution for awhile. If he was honest with himself, he shouldn’t be trying it now. But the thought of leaving that child in such a state for longer, when he had the power to help...it had been what drove him last night, and it drove him now. He’d eat as many of these awful, horrendous wafers as he had to, he was going to find and pull every last trace of geo, watch every trace of cryo melt, until he was certain that either the structure was *gone* and *staying gone*, or that he couldn’t save him that way. And if he couldn’t, if it didn’t work, he was going to go and sleep off his migraine and hope no one saw him crying.

He glanced at the other two in the hall with him, and sighed. It looked like they were as tense and disheartened as he was, though they showed it in their own ways. Lord Morax stared at the floor in apparent deep thought, hand on chin and brow furrowed. Madame Ping had her arms folded and

was tapping her foot, mumbling what sounded like recipes, of all things.

“You can come in now.”

Bosacius’ call was so soft, he barely heard it, but as tense as everyone was, all three jumped a little. It was odd to see Lord Morax startle like that, but then he’d seen him acting in atypical ways a lot this past week. The kid must be getting to him, too.

Another wafer went into the geo yaksha’s mouth as they filed into Xiao’s room, and he was startled to find Xiao precariously positioned on his side at the edge of the bed, instead of sensibly lying on his stomach in the middle of it. He looked at Bosacius questioningly - and realized just how exhausted his friend and superior was, when he saw the way the electro yaksha slumped in the chair by the bed.

“Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll probably fall asleep shortly after you start. Just...please don’t move him more than you have to. That was the only stable position with reasonable wing access we could figure out that wouldn’t give him problems when he woke up. Apparently, there are some very bad memories associated with lying on his front with his wings out.”

Menogias swallowed and nodded. That...was not a possibility he had considered.

“If we do have to move him, we’ll put him back when we’re done. Now, you get to sleep before I dose you as well. You’ve been awake far too long dealing with this, after everything else, and I don’t need you becoming a patient as well.”

He blinked at the healer, surprised Madame Ping was being so stern so quickly, but Bosacius just chuckled.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll leave you to it, then. And...I hope you succeed. The little whirlwind’s been through enough...”

“I think we all agree there.”

Bosacius nodded and leaned back in the chair, setting his arms up into an odd sort of headrest, and as far as Menogias could tell, was out almost immediately. Lord Morax moved to what had become his usual spot, by the head of the bed, carefully stepping over the wing draped on the floor. Madame Ping knelt by the same wing, then gave the geo yaksha a nod.

“Let me know when the wings are clear, will you?”

“Of course.”

Menogias hesitated, then went and set the bowl on the table before snagging a handful of qingxin wafers and standing behind the healer. Best to start with the wings, give her as much time as possible in case this didn’t work.

It was a struggle to force his elemental sight to its fullest level this time, his system resisting what had caused him pain so recently, but he forced it active - and then swayed as his head spun. He cursed quietly and shoved two more wafers into his mouth.

“Menogias? Are you alright?”

Of course he noticed. Madame Ping already knew what a struggle tonight would be for him, and

had refrained from comment, but...

“I will be, my lord. I have to be. I’m not leaving this child to suffer.”

He saw the brilliantly geo-colored form nod, then his attention narrowed to the tip of the left wing. He tried hard not to pay attention to the physical form. He had seen enough from the doorway to know the damage was sickening, and he could not afford the distraction, not if he was to help.

The structure was a lot denser here, as Madame Ping had predicted. There were a lot more ‘roots’ everywhere, and the shape was more complex. He’d have to be careful...it was as well he was dealing with this while his concentration was at its best for the night.

Luckily, complex or not, the geo threads were no more reluctant to come loose here than they were elsewhere. They came loose so easily, in fact, that it occurred to him to wonder if they were meant to. But no, why would Moharus set up an easy way to remove what was, essentially, an elaborate slave collar? He must just be getting better at it, after all the practice the night before.

The assumption that practice helped was born out by his speed. He was definitely getting this done quicker, this time, for all it was no less tedious and meticulous. Definitely a good thing, he’d had to get another handful of wafers by the time he was halfway done with the first wing...and that handful was gone when he finished it.

“First wing is clear.”

Madame Ping immediately reached forward to begin her own work as he went around the bed to start at the edge of the child’s other wing. At least this put him next to the bowl...he continued to absently munch on wafers whenever his focus faltered as he worked. The bitterness didn’t bother him so much anymore, oddly. They tasted almost refreshing. His sense of time faded, lost in the haze of a strange drugged clarity that helped him narrow his focus to just the task at hand.

He was pulled from that narrow focus, shortly after he finished with the last of the child’s limbs and was about to start on his head, when Madame Ping sighed and stepped back from the bed - he hadn’t even noticed her change position to work on the other wing.

“I’ve done what I can. A lot of this is too old to do much magically, and some of it...I think I’m going to have to consult with some bird adepts tomorrow.”

“Very well. Just ensure you do not reveal the true identity of your patient.”

“I know, I know, you old dragon. He’s simply a child adeptus named Xiao that you’ve taken under your wing after finding him in less than ideal circumstances. I’m hardly going to - “

Menogias tuned out the conversation as irrelevant and returned to the task at hand, absently reaching into the bowl for another wafer.

‘Hmm. Nearly empty. That could be a problem...I’ll just have to work faster.’

Faster or not, he made sure to take extreme care with the threads that entered into the area representative of the child’s brain. Better safe than sorry. Last, the torso - and that’s when he reached in the bowl and found it empty.

‘Not good.’

He took a deep, slightly shaky breath, and tried to forget the wafers. He hadn’t had them last night, and had managed just fine. He could do this.

The first layer of the torso wasn't too much trouble, but by the time he got through the next he could feel the explosion waiting behind his eyes.

Another layer pulled free. His mouth watered, craving the refreshing bitterness of qingxin.

Another...his vision was getting blurry, but it was just one more, he could do it, even if he was wavering on his feet, his body didn't matter, just his mind...

"Menogias?!"

"Almost...done...don't distract me..."

A few more threads, it was hard to focus, he could hear movement, the bowl clattered, it was all so loud...

The last thread pulled free, they all dissipated, the cryo started to melt...

"Menogias, you need to stop for a moment and look at me. Please."

"I'm done, maybe. They're pulled. Gotta make sure they don't grow back..."

"Menogias! Look at me! You're slurring your words...Menogias, the bowl is empty, did you eat *all* the wafers?"

"Wafers...more wafers would be nice...refreshing...like cryo...but all the cryo is going away..."

"I'm glad it's going away, but...dammit. Okay, I have to let you keep watching until it's gone and we know it's not coming back, but as soon as it's gone, tell me, okay?"

Madame Ping sounded scared. Why did she sound scared? Madame Ping wasn't scared of *anything*, she scared *other* things. Like...like diseases! Diseases were terrified of the healer. He giggled and staggered a bit, then remembered he was supposed to watch the cryo melt. He looked at the kid on the bed. Who knew cryo could melt so fast? Drip, drip, he imagined the sounds of melting icicles as it all went away, and kept staring blankly for awhile.

"Menogias?"

A hand shook his shoulder, and he looked around blearily until he spotted the dendro-colored blur next to him.

"Hi den'ro ladeeee..."

"Menogias. Is the cryo gone?"

"Cryo? Cryo...oh ya...it drip dripped away awhile ago..."

It was hard to talk and stand at the same time. He lost his balance and started to tip sideways.

"Wheee!"

Hands caught him. He looked up and green filled his vision.

"Pretty....."

"...is he going to be alright?"

“I think so, once we get him to sleep...if the cryo’s been gone awhile and there hasn’t been a severe drop in Xiao’s energy, I think we can safely assume it’s gone.”

“Hey! I righ’ here!”

“Yes, yes you are. Menogias, I need you to come with me and Morax, alright? We’re going to take you to a bed - “

“Behs ah fuuun...”

” - and then you need to *sleep*, alright? If you don’t get to sleep *fast*, it’s going to hurt, a lot, and we don’t want you to hurt, Menogias. Can you do that for us?”

“Hur nah fuh. Wih tai.”

“I...can’t understand you anymore. Just...try to walk, okay? We’ve got you...”

The dendro blur took him by one arm and the geo blur took his other, and he tried to walk, he really did. The floor kept making bumps to trip him though, and he really wanted to lean on the geo blur, the geo blur made him feel safe.

Step, trip, step, stumble, step...the world wasn’t seeming quite so funny anymore. It was too bright and loud, it was like the walls were breathing and the floor clanged with each step. It hurt, and as he realized that, it was like the key to a not-funny door and his head hurt, it hurt, it hurt...

“Pleh stah, ple ple may ih stah...”

He was crying, some part of him thought he shouldn’t cry in front of the geo blur but he couldn’t stop it...

“We’re almost there, hang on, we’re almost there and then you can sleep it off...”

“I will just carry him. It will be faster.”

“You’re right. I don’t know why I didn’t...”

“You are exhausted, we all are.”

Then he lost his balance as the geo blur swept his feet and it made him so dizzy and there was so much motion and it *hurt* and it wouldn’t stop and then the light went away, everything went away, and the dark was so nice, so welcoming...

When Xiao woke, it felt strange.

For one thing, his wings were out. The couple times he’d woken up with them out before, they’d been an agony because he’d passed out while Master Moharus was playing with them. But now...they still hurt, some, but a lot less than before. In fact, they felt better than he ever

remembered them feeling.

For another...he felt *light*. Despite the unaccustomed weight of wings, he felt so light he thought he'd float right off the bed.

And...he wasn't afraid. When he'd opened his eyes, the first thing in view was Bosacius, sleeping in the chair, right where he'd promised he'd be. And on top of that, the something in his body that seemed to expect pain at a moment's notice was...gone.

It wasn't like he wasn't still afraid of being hurt, or that he might accidentally do something wrong and be punished. It was more like...like there had been a knife pressed to his side at all times, and he'd forgotten it was there, and now it was gone.

Was that the 'structure' they'd been talking about? Did this mean it was gone? That he'd never feel the pain of the gem again?

It...was hard to believe. He couldn't remember a time when that hadn't been a constant threat, except those first couple days after Master Moharus died, and even then, when he consciously thought it was gone, he'd feared it. He hadn't really been all that surprised when it came back. Now...he thought he would be, if it did.

Something fluttered in his chest, and he tried not to let it. He felt...wonderful, but hope had bit him too many times before. He had to *know*, first...

He dismissed his wings. It was...nice...having them out, but he wasn't really used to them and they were awkward indoors. Then he sat up and started inspecting himself.

He didn't *look* any different.

But then, he hadn't seen the structure before, why would he now?

Xiao glanced at Bosacius, who was still asleep, snoring softly, and quietly slipped out of bed to pad over to the mirror. His face looked the same as ever too, but...he sighed and reached for the comb. How his hair kept pulling loose so fast when he wasn't being knocked around or anything was a mystery. When he was done, he pulled the loose hairs from the comb, and then hesitated. Bosacius had shown him where to dispose of such things yesterday, when he'd helped Xiao with all the feathers and hair he'd been hiding, but he wasn't sure he was supposed to leave the room right now...

Maybe if no one saw him...

He stretched his senses as far as he could. He could dimly sense the solid one at the furthest reaches of his range, and the honorable one with him...he didn't sense Master Morax at all. It should be safe. A quick glance to make sure Bosacius was still asleep, and he teleported to the kitchen.

There, the bin in the corner. He threw the little coil of hair in and immediately teleported back, uneasy at Bosacius being out of sight even those few seconds...but the big yaksha was still asleep when he got back, perfectly fine, and Xiao sighed with relief - and then realized that once more, he was left unsure what he was supposed to do. He *still* didn't have standing duties.

He'd have to ask Bosacius about that when he woke up...in the meantime, straightening the bed again would at least give him something to keep occupied for a bit, and no one had *objected* to it before. So it should, at least, be allowed.

He'd almost finished when he bumped the yaksha's leg, trying to reach past to tweak the last corner of the blanket. Bosacius jumped and snorted, and Xiao immediately sprang back out of the way. He almost threw himself to the floor, but caught himself in time...this was Bosacius. He was pretty sure he wouldn't like it.

"Sorry! This one didn't mean to wake you!"

Green eyes blinked at him.

"It's fine. I meant to be up before you, anyway. How are you feeling? Did it work?"

Xiao hesitated. He wasn't upset? Bosacius usually wasn't, but he had to hit the limit sometime, right? There had to be a line somewhere, in what one so much higher would tolerate from one such as him.

"This one...thinks so? This one feels much better, but looks no different, except maybe for one's wings, but one didn't look because they were in the way..."

Should he summon them now? Did Bosacius want to inspect them? Maybe not, he was smiling now, maybe that was enough...

"I'm glad to hear it, though I'm surprised Madame Ping didn't leave a note or something."

"What's a note?"

"A piece of paper with words written on it..."

The yaksha's eyes narrowed, and he looked like he was about to ask something, but before he could Xiao was moving quickly around the room.

"Is that a note?"

Bosacius paused, mouth still open to say whatever it was, and looked where he was pointing. He picked up the sheet of paper and nodded.

"Yes, it is. Thank you, little whirlwind."

As the yaksha stared at the paper, Xiao shuffled his feet and stared at them. He wasn't entirely sure what 'thank you' meant, but he had a more important question to worry about first.

"Bosacius....do you know what this one is supposed to be doing?"

He looked up from the paper.

"What do you mean?"

Xiao took a deep breath. Addressing this directly wasn't easy. But now that he was in better health, he had no doubt he was expected to be useful. This was obvious, to him at least...but it was increasingly clear that Bosacius was terrifyingly unaware of what the world was like. Which was not unexpected, really, with his much higher rank and all. Why would he know what a slave's life was like?

"If a slave isn't busy, the Master finds a use for them, and it's usually...not pleasant. I - this one would prefer to avoid that, but I...no one has said what this one should be doing..."

To his surprise, Bosacius immediately put aside the 'note' and knelt in front of him, two hands

taking his own and the other two settling on Xiao's shoulders.

"Xiao...little whirlwind....you're not a slave. Morax doesn't keep slaves."

He didn't respond for a long moment. Bosacius was so kind...maybe he didn't know because he'd never seen that side of things. Master Morax certainly seemed subtler about it than Master Moharus. He spoke quietly, and looked Bosacius in the eyes, trying to be clear.

"This one is either a slave, or a prisoner of war. With my former master dead, the latter is of little value and readily disposed of. If this one's position is undecided, it is better to show one's willingness to be useful, to avoid that fate. This one does not know what tasks are available to perform, within the restrictions placed on this one. Could you tell me?"

Would he ever get through a conversation with this kid without feeling like he was being knifed in the gut? Guilt swamped him, as he realized that he was as culpable as anyone else here. He *knew* Xiao still thought of himself as a slave, or at least probably did. He'd even explained that to Morax a few days ago. But he'd never sat down and explained to Xiao that wasn't the case, and obviously no one else had either.

But then, when had they had the chance? They'd all lost his trust so fast, and there was no way he'd believe someone he didn't trust about his status. He could have explained it yesterday, perhaps, but there had been more urgent matters to deal with.

There always seemed to be urgent matters to deal with, when it came to his little whirlwind. But from what he'd gathered from the note before *this* came up, hopefully that would start to change.

He sighed and switched from kneeling to sitting crosslegged.

"Xiao, please sit with me for a moment. I have something to explain, and it'll probably take some time, and I'm sure you will have questions."

The boy hesitated a moment, then copied his own position on the floor.

"Morax really should have explained this to you when you made your contract, but at that point in time, he did not realize that you had been a slave. He simply thought you a very young warrior. And once he - once we all - figured that out, things had already gone sideways, and you were in no position to believe anything we said. Do you trust me, now? Do you believe I wouldn't lie to you?"

A slow nod. Good.

"You have not been a slave since Moharus died. Nor are you a prisoner of war. Morax doesn't tolerate slavery, and he doesn't trade prisoners, he has no reason to keep either. We brought you off that battlefield *because we thought you were worth saving*. You don't have to do anything not specified in your contract. You're free, like me, and Madame Ping, and the other yaksha you met. We all have contracts with Morax too - rather more complex than yours, actually. My understanding is..."

He trailed off as tears started trailing down Xiao's cheeks, and by all appearances, not happy ones.

"Little whirlwind?"

The barest whisper.

"You were wrong."

His eyes were on the floor now...it was clear Bosacius had messed up somehow...had he thrown too much information at the kid at once? He thought the logic might help with acceptance, but if it was overwhelming him instead...

"About what?"

The kid's knees rose to his chest, and his arms wrapped around them. There was a flash and his wings were wrapped around him too, making the way the little whirlwind was now trembling more obvious. At least they didn't look broken anymore, for all they were still in terrible shape. This...this looked like more than just information overload...

"Xiao, what's wrong? What was I wrong about?"

"I wasn't worth saving. I-this one is not... If Master M-Morax doesn't need slaves, or prisoners, then this one is j-just an en-enemy who's d-done terrible things...b-better a slave, th-than just..."

The kid dissolved into sobs, and he cursed himself quietly. He'd known the kid felt guilty for his past from day one, that's why that first story had taken the path it had. How could he have forgotten that now? And those wings were a clear signal to keep out, he didn't dare touch him, no matter how much he wanted to hold Xiao tight until he felt some sense of self worth...

"Little whirlwind, we don't consider what Master Moharus forced you to do to be your doing. Nothing we have seen of you, nothing you have said or done since we've known you, has indicated you would ever do those things by choice. Please, look at me...it's alright..."

"But you don't know! You don't know what I've done! The p-people I've hurt...their eyes...you'd h-hate me if you knew..."

"Xiao, I do know. I know the name you had, and I'm Morax's marshal, remember? I read the reports. I don't hate you, I could never hate you. Is that why you're upset? Did you think we brought you back without knowing?"

"Th-then am I here to be punished? T-to pay for what I've done, so others can st-stop being scared?"

"No, absolutely not. Little whirlwind, you are not the first warrior to join us once their god was dead. The situation may be a little...unorthodox, in your case, but Morax did not bring you here to be a slave, or to punish you, or anything of the sort. Remember your contract? You are here to *heal*. And after that, what you want to do is up for discussion, and will always be *your choice*."

The wings loosened enough for Xiao to peer at Bosacius' face.

"I don't understand. *Why*?"

He sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair.

"I don't expect you to...really understand this, given your past. Not yet. But just like me, just like

your other Mighty One, there are people in this world who can't stand by and watch others hurt. Especially kids. Morax, Madame Ping, many others here...none of us can watch someone like you hurting and not hurt ourselves. So we try to fix it, where we can."

The wings loosened further, but the kid's gaze returned to the floor.

"What do you mean, someone like me?"

He looked at the little whirlwind, consideringly. How to phrase this...

"Someone who's been through things no one deserves to endure. Someone with a future ahead of them, if only they were given the chance. Someone who just needs help."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't expect you to, yet. Learning to understand that is part of the healing ahead of you."

Xiao's wings rustled and then folded to his back for a moment, before disappearing again. He rested his head on his knees, and Bosacius wished he dared hug him, but strongly suspected he still wouldn't react well at the moment.

"I know...all of this is a bit much, at the moment. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - "

He sighed.

"We'll probably need to discuss this again, before you can accept it, I know. You can bring it up any time, alright? In the meantime, just...don't worry too much about what you should be doing. Your only duty right now is to rest and heal. I'll talk with the others, see what we can come up with to keep you occupied, but whatever it is won't be something you *have* to do, alright?"

Xiao nodded against his knees, but it felt less like an agreement and more like an acknowledgement. As if this, too, was viewed as an order.

Bosacius sighed, then opened his arms wide. He was relieved when his little whirlwind didn't hesitate before crawling forward to curl up at his side. At least he hadn't lost that, this morning.

He just wished he thought they'd gained something.

Bathtime

Chapter Notes

Apologies for any typos I missed, the majority of this chapter was written while competing to speedwrite XD

TW this chapter: Slavery, flashbacks, drowning, asphyxiation, mild electrocution, selfharm

As always, if I missed something, please let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiao wasn't sure how long he sat there curled against Bosacius, just sitting there trying to sort things out in his mind. Long enough for the patch of sunlight on the floor to move, at least.

It was clear the yaksha truly *believed* what he'd said. But that didn't mean it was true, and Xiao had noticed before that he seemed utterly ignorant about some facts of life. It was possible, even likely, that Master Morax kept some aspects of his doings hidden from those of his adepts who wouldn't approve. How else would he maintain the loyalty of those like Bosacius? But every god had slaves, for all the word for it and their treatment varied. There was always a need for some to be lower than the others, to deal with what others were too important to be bothered with. Those who could be *forced* to do what no others would.

Master Morax's realm, from what he'd seen and heard, was larger and richer than Master Moharus' had been. There was no way that was maintained without slaves. Bosacius must just be kept unaware of such things, so far beneath his notice. And Master Morax would probably be angry if Xiao changed that, and lost him his marshal's loyalty. So he didn't dare ask Bosacius anything more on the subject. *He* wouldn't be mad at Xiao for it, probably, but he wasn't the Master...

But if he wanted to ask anyone else without Bosacius knowing, he'd have to leave his presence. And then Xiao couldn't protect him from the dangers the big yaksha was so clearly oblivious to, and if he wasn't there to protect him he could lose him...

He put his head in his hands, and Bosacius pulled him tighter against his side. He couldn't help relaxing into the warmth.

Time passed, and he still didn't have an answer. He'd just have to wait, he supposed, and hope he didn't get in too much trouble for slacking in the meantime.

"Well, I know one thing we could do to use up your morning."

Xiao jumped at the unexpected words, and looked up.

"How would you like to get properly clean?"

He frowned and felt at his braid. It didn't feel like any of it had come loose in the short time since he'd combed it.

"I already cleaned myself up..."

There was a moment of silence, and Xiao realized that must not be what Bosacius meant. But what else was there? When Master Moharus told him to clean himself up, he was to ensure his braid was tight with no loose strands, and make sure any of his leavings in the area found their way into a furnace...

“Little whirlwind...have you never had a bath before?”

He frowned, and tried to remember. Once....once after a particularly bloody battle, Master Moharus had told one of his hydro users to give him a bath, and he'd found himself sprayed across the courtyard and half drowned. He'd been sore everywhere after, and coughed for days...he curled up tighter against Bosacius' side.

“Once...I-this one didn't like it...it hurt, and they laughed, and...”

He tried to think. Who here used hydro? Gentle one did, but...he felt his spine creak as he curled tighter still.

“Please don't make gentle one spray me...or anyone else...”

Bosacius' grip pulled him tighter, and Xiao felt his thumb rubbing his shoulder.

“That definitely doesn't sound like what I meant. No one is going to spray you, little whirlwind.”

He'd wait and see. This might be another thing Bosacius just didn't know about.

“A bath here is...do you remember when you first came here, and Madame Ping took a damp, warm cloth, and wiped your skin around your injuries? She was cleaning them. You do that for yourself in a bath, except you do it in a big, warm pool of water.”

That...didn't sound so bad, actually...

“It's very relaxing, and you feel better after, all refreshed and...well, clean. Not itchy, or sticky, or greasy.”

He frowned.

“Is this like yesterday? When you said...you said hurting isn't normal, that it was what you and the others were trying to fix?”

A moment's silence, and a gentle squeeze.

“Yes, you could say that. You shouldn't have to feel those things all the time, either.”

He didn't really see the importance...those things were just something he ignored. They didn't interfere with his ability to do his duties or anything. Xiao hardly even noticed feeling those things. But...he wouldn't mind them being gone, either.

“This...bath...is something you want me to do?”

Bosacius' thumb stilled on his shoulder a moment, then resumed rubbing.

“This is something you'll need to do eventually, and that I think you will feel better for doing. But it doesn't have to be right now, if you're not ready.”

He really wished Bosacius would just tell him right out what to do. But ever since the morning before, he always phrased things as ‘if you want’, or ‘if you're ready’. It wasn't as though his

desires and readiness were relevant, and all this hedging about kept making him feel like he was sinking in thick, clingy mud.

Still, agreeing to whatever it was after a few questions seemed to be enough to set the big yaksha at ease, so that's what he'd continue to do.

"Where do we go?"

It wasn't until they reached the pools that Xiao realized his mistake.

They hadn't been far; still within the area defined as 'Madame Ping's', but outside, down a small hill past the benches. Two pools, one flowing into the other, the lower one draining off...somewhere. Nothing obviously alarming. But the moment the expanse of water combined with the sense of electro at his side, he started shaking, and couldn't stop.

"Little whirlwind? What's wrong?"

Of course he noticed. For all he seemed oblivious to so much about the world, it was hard to hide what he was feeling from Bosacius, however he tried. But he couldn't seem to answer. It wasn't just the shaking now, he was feeling cold, and it was hard to breathe, and it was like there was a yawning abyss in his mind waiting to swallow him up and make him *remember* something...

"Is it the water? I promise it's not as deep as it looks..."

He managed to shake his head, but otherwise felt frozen to the spot, just trying to breathe and shove that abyss away, but the memory still tickled the back of his mind but he didn't want to remember, but why didn't he want to remember this particular one? There were so many bad memories, what made this one worse...the wind picked up, swirling around him gently, but that just brought the memory closer and he almost knew and didn't want to and please go away -

- and Bosacius was kneeling in front of him, and saying something, and put his hand on his shoulder, and then it wasn't Bosacius, it was Master Moharus, and the hand was the butt of Xiao's spear -

He landed in the electrified water with a splash, and frantically swam for the surface only to be pushed back down with the butt of his own spear. In his desperation, he grabbed for the spear itself, trying to pull himself up by it, but he was only shoved down more violently before it was twisted and shaken from his grasp before jabbing back down, slamming into his gut this time as it pushed him farther from the surface.

Alatus stared wide eyed at the figure above, pleading for mercy with his eyes since he didn't dare open his mouth and lose what air his lungs held. Master only glared at him, however, before speaking - and while the water garbled his words, they beat on his mind as clear as any other orders.

"You will stay down there until you have learned your lesson, dog. Defy me in battle again, and the next punishment will be far worse."

Suddenly the spearhaft was gone, and he made for the surface as quickly as he could, but with the effects of the electro in the water making his muscles spasm, the spreading ice cut off his escape long before he reached it. He tried to break through before it got too thick, ignoring the increased pain and shock as the reaction combined with cryo, but he didn't have the leverage, it was too late...

His vision started to darken at the edges, and in desperation he augmented his breath with his anemo powers. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough, but passing out was as bad as sleeping, he had to stay awake or it would be worse...he kept it up as long as he could, for what felt like hours beneath the ice in the water that burned with electro, that grew colder and colder until he could hardly feel his fingers, but anemo could only do so much.

He woke held dripping above the pool by his hair, coughing and staring into the furious eyes of Master.

*"You **still** defy me?! Daring to **rest** during your punishment?! Clearly, you were not below long enough. Again, and stay awake this time, or you will spend the next three days in my playroom."*

*He tried to plead for mercy, to beg, to explain he hadn't meant to sleep - but all that came out was a croak, and then he was in the water again, and it was cold, and it hurt, and he couldn't **breathe** ...*

"...Xiao! Come on, little whirlwind, snap out of it! Breathe! Breathe with me, here, feel me breathe and match it..."

He dimly felt his hand pressed against another chest, and felt it rise and fall. He struggled to follow the orders, but he felt like he couldn't *breathe*, even though he could feel his chest moving too fast and air dragging down his throat it never seemed to reach his lungs -

"...slower, little whirlwind, that's it, calm down, breathe with me, in two three out two three..."

Gradually, he managed to slow to match what his hand felt, and oddly, the slower he breathed, the more air he seemed to get. His fingers felt warm against the other person, and he realized he wasn't cold anymore, or wet...the person talking was Bosacius, not Master Moharus, Master Moharus was dead, and Bosacius didn't get mad at him. He took a slow, deep breath in, and let it out.

He was Xiao, not Alatus.

"I'm sorry."

Bosacius sighed, and sat down.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. It's not your fault."

Xiao gave him a skeptical look, but didn't say anything. He suspected this was something they wouldn't ever agree about. He realized he was still shaking, and sat down as well, hugging his legs to his chest.

"I mean it, little whirlwind. This sort of thing is expected from someone who's been through what you have, and both I and Madame Ping knew we'd have to help you through a lot of flashbacks until we figured out how to help you avoid them."

That...he felt like he'd understood about one word in three.

"Flashbacks?"

"That's what we call what you just went through. Something triggers a bad memory, and the person winds up reliving it, often as if it were the first time. Once you know what triggers it, you can try to avoid those things."

It was nice to put a name to it, but he wasn't sure knowing these 'triggers' would help. He was unlikely to have much choice in whether to avoid them or not.

"Do you know what set it off this time?"

Thinking back, he was pretty sure he did. It wasn't hard to figure out with it all so fresh in his mind. He fought back the sensation of cold, and gripped the grass, reminding himself that it was always warm here.

"I think so."

"Will you tell me? Maybe if we work together, we can find a way around it."

He didn't answer for a long moment. He knew Bosacius was trying to help, but...it was still hard to think, and if he tried to talk about it, what if the wrong thing slipped out? What if he made it sound like *he* was the problem, and he left Xiao alone in the wet and the cold and the -

His breathing was speeding up. He had to calm down. If he freaked out again it would just cause problems.

Unfortunately, Bosacius noticed.

"Breathe, little whirlwind. It's alright, we don't have to talk about it right now. In two three, out two three..."

The numbers made it *worse*. It was already hard to think and they were distracting him and it was *loud* even though he knew the man was being gentle and quiet and he just wanted him to *stop talking and go away* except he didn't actually want him to *leave* and he kept going with the *stupid numbers*....

"I know!"

Silence descended and he gripped his head and fought back tears. Anger was easier to deal with than fear, but he didn't want to be mad at Bosacius either. At least, with the quiet, he finally managed to get his breathing under control again.

"I'm sorry. I just...please, just let me...I can do this, I really can..."

"No, I'm sorry...let me know when you're ready."

Bosacius got up and moved several feet away before sitting down again, and that was enough to knock the tears loose. He didn't want him to *go away*. He just...it was too much, and he needed a minute. It wasn't like following orders, where he could shut off his mind and let his body act until things faded away. Bosacius wanted him to *think*, so he had to get past it *now*.

Something scraped his shoulder, and he realized he had his wings out again. He had another spike of panic before he remembered they all knew now, anyway. So he let himself hide in their warm

confines for a bit, running his fingers through the remaining feathers as he lost himself in the soothing motion.

Bosacius quietly reamed himself as he sat down in a new spot, far enough away not to intrude without - hopefully - being so far the kid would feel abandoned. He had to remember that unlike the other kids he worked with, Xiao had been dealing with all this *on his own* for at least decades, possibly centuries. He had to have his own ways to cope by now, and didn't need the yaksha guiding him through every step every time he started to panic. He hoped the little whirlwind wasn't too angry with him.

And he hoped there was an easy way to dodge the triggers on this one...the kid really did need to get clean, but more than that, once he got used to the idea, baths could provide an easy way for him to destress and relax when he needed to. He was pretty sure Xiao hadn't had many such things in his life.

After having seen him hide in his wings back in the room earlier, Bosacius wasn't terribly surprised to see it now. He just hoped the kid wouldn't feel the need to close out the world for long. The yaksha waited, patient and quiet, careful to look as relaxed as possible.

He wasn't relaxed. He was worried, and hurting, and angry at those who had hurt the kid who he was starting to have to work to avoid calling his little brother, if only in his own head. Really, he'd known the kid what, a week? For all he knew Morax would succeed in finding his real family. He really shouldn't be letting himself think of the whirlwind as his kid brother, not if he might not see him again once he was healed.

He tried to direct these emotions more usefully, thinking of ways around possible triggers, but he didn't have enough information. Bosacius hoped Xiao was being honest earlier about it not being the water itself, because if expanses of water were a trigger...that mostly left spongebaths as a bathing option, and they weren't *nearly* so relaxing.

To his relief, the little whirlwind's wings opened up before too long - not fully, but enough to make it clear he was open to communication - especially since he spoke a few moments later.

"I was cold and hurting and drowning, and there was cryo keeping me trapped and electro in the water hurting me...is that what you n-needed to know?"

By the end, even from this far away, it was obvious Xiao was shaking again. Bosacius took a deep breath and reminded himself to *let him calm himself down*. He'd made it clear he didn't need or want help right now. Water with electro....so his presence had been part of the problem, probably, even if the kid didn't say it outright.

"Yes, that's very helpful. Thank you, little whirlwind, I know that wasn't easy."

He waited, watching, as the shaking lessened, then got up and moved closer so they could converse more readily, speaking on the way.

“If the water was cold in the memory, would knowing the pools are warm help? I could wait here while you - “

Bloody feathers. There were more bloody feathers scattered around his little whirlwind. His wings had hidden them from view before - he glanced at them quickly and verified that yes, there was fresh blood where those feathers had been. Fear shot through him and he struggled to keep his voice even.

“Xiao... those feathers look like they were just pulled out. Did you...”

He trailed off, his brain frozen. He couldn't think of a way to word the question that didn't sound accusatory. Xiao blinked at him and looked down, wings lifting to clear his view.

“Oh. Sorry. I'll clean it up...”

“That's not what I'm concerned about.”

Utter confusion filled the kid's face as he looked up at Bosacius. He sighed, and snuck another glance at the affected wing. It looked like the bleeding was already stopping. He knelt and hugged the kid, moving slowly so he could pull away if he wanted to. To his relief, Xiao hugged him back, if a bit hesitantly.

“Don't worry about it. Why don't you put your wings away for now so they don't get wet, and try heading over to test the water? I'll stay back so there's no sense of electro quite so close, and we'll stop if it gets to be too much.”

There was a nod against his chest, and a subdued flash of power as Xiao's wings disappeared. At least if they were put away, the kid couldn't do them more harm for now...he'd have to talk to Madame Ping about this. This was not an issue to address directly, and it was going to be more difficult to handle than with most kids. He wasn't sure how they'd even be able to be sure whether he was just hiding in his wings for a minute, or hurting himself in there, and disrupting the reasonable coping mechanism to try to prevent the other would be...less than helpful.

He waited until the little whirlwind was almost halfway down the little hill before starting to amble along behind him. He wouldn't have then, wanting to give him all the space the kid needed, but Xiao was glancing back at him before he'd gone far at all. His electro nature might be a problem right now - but clearly it didn't negate the kid's need to have him near.

That...would be a problem, soon. Everyone would have expected him to be resting today and yesterday, unless something major came up; but he'd have to return to his duties tomorrow. And there were the other kids he was working with...if he up and disappeared on them, they'd be worried, and at least some of them would wonder if they'd done something wrong. He could probably take reports from his generals here, and Xiao had already met them...hmm. Bosacius wondered if Morax would be alright with him taking the kid down to a spot near the town. Being around other children who also had traumatic backgrounds, but were clearly recovering, might help him...and might show him that it was okay to be a kid.

He stopped and waited when Xiao reached the edge of the upper pool, and watched the tension visibly leave the kid's posture when he felt the very warm water. Good, he'd hoped that would help. Whether it was enough to defuse the problem entirely, though...well, there was only one way to test. He slowly walked closer, watching the whirlwind carefully to see if he was tensing up as he got closer.

To his relief, the kid had only tensed up a little by the time he got into conversational distance.

Still, better to be sure.

“What do you think, is this alright? Any warning feelings creeping up on you?”

Xiao shook his head.

“I’m well.”

“Good, but let me know if that changes, okay? I’m hoping this will be something you enjoy.”

The kid looked a little confused, but nodded.

“The lower pool is for washing. That way the flow of water sends the soap and dirt over the edge, where it won’t contaminate the soaking pool - that’s this one. So first you go to the washing pool, then get undressed so you can reach everywhere and get in the water.”

Given that Xiao’d had no idea what a bath even *was*, he figured he should explain even the apparently obvious steps. Better to avoid misunderstandings before they happened.

“Should I take my bath now too, and show you what to do? Or would my being in the water bring bad things to mind? I promise not to use my electro.”

“I...I don’t think it’ll be...bad...Soap? Like for floors?”

“Sort of. Soap for bathing is different from soap for other things. It’s gentler, and smells nicer.”

“Oh.”

Bosacius led the way down to the lower pool, and pointed to a basket under a nearby tree.

“That’s where we put our clothes, to be washed later. We won’t want to get into dirty clothing when we just got ourselves clean, after all.”

“What will we wear when we’re done, then?”

“There’s robes in a basket up by the soaking pool, that we can wear on our way back up. Those of us who wind up here regularly often stash a set of our own clothes nearby though, and I put an outfit for you up here days ago. I’ll show you when we’re done.”

One of the advantages of a subspace was the ability to manipulate it in any way you wanted, given enough practice. Madame Ping was an expert at it, and had crafted the bathing pools with patients in mind - there was ‘natural’ stone seating all around the edges under the water, higher on one side than the other to suit a variety of heights. Bosacius strode through the water for the far side, which was deeper. Conveniently, the side by the tree was the side suited for shorter bathers, and hopefully that’d give Xiao all the space he needed.

He couldn’t help but grin at the slow wonder on the kid’s face, when he settled in the water and the heat seeped in and *forced* him to relax. The yaksha didn’t say anything, just relaxing himself with a couple arms hooked on the side of the pool and letting the kid get used to it. A little extra soak would hardly hurt either of them.

After awhile, the kid looked at him expectantly, and he pointed at one of the supply baskets that were all around the edges.

“The blocks in there are soap. You’ll want one of those, and one of the cloths.”

He, likewise, snagged one of each from his nearest basket. He was mildly amused to note that all the soaps were scented with qingxin at the moment - Madame Ping was anticipating, as usual. They all could use a bit more alertness these days.

“Now, dip them both in the water, to get them good and wet, then put the soap in the cloth and scrub it all over to get soap on the cloth.”

He demonstrated, and Xiao watched for a moment and then copied him, right down to setting the bar of soap aside on the rim when he was done.

“Alright, now you lift the part of yourself you want to wash out of the water and scrub at it with the cloth, until all the grime is gone and your skin feels refreshed. I don’t expect you to know how that feels right away, and I’ll help you check if you like, but that’ll be the best way to judge when you’re more used to bathing regularly. It’s easiest to start with your arms.”

Once again, he suited words to action and demonstrated, dunking his arms in the water to get them wetter before he started scrubbing at them with the soft, soapy cloth.

“Regularly?”

“Yes, this is something we generally do after anything that gets us feeling grimy, or every couple days otherwise. It’s a good way to relax, and I think you’ll find you like feeling clean, once you’re used to it.”

The little whirlwind didn’t respond verbally, just nodded in acknowledgement, before beginning to work on his own arm. In no time at all, the cloth was dark with dirt.

“If your cloth gets dirty like that, just squeeze it out in the water until it’s clean again and res soap it. The current will carry the dirt away. If it doesn’t get clean enough that way, you can toss it in the basket we left our clothes in, and grab a new one.”

“There won’t be trouble over wasting them?”

“Not at all. That’s what they’re there for. Staying clean is part of staying healthy, so Madame Ping is hardly going to be stingy with the means for it.”

He still looked worried, but nodded.

A comfortable quiet descended as they got clean. Bosacius slowed his own progress purposefully, not wanting to rush the kid. The pile of dirty cloths grew, but that wasn’t really a surprise...the number of scars revealed as the dirt and grime was removed tore at his heart, though. He was really starting to wonder how his little whirlwind had survived the last few decades, much less whatever had come before, that was already erased from his skin by time...

He caught Xiao frowning at his braid - right, he had long hair, it wouldn’t be as simple as his own, and he couldn’t remember where the presoftened soaps that made it easier were stashed.

“Would you like help with your hair?”

A long hesitation, then a nod, and he moved over to Xiao’s side of the pool.

“Alright, go ahead and duck under the water real quick to get it wet while I soften up some of the soap. Madame Ping keeps some presoftened soap somewhere for long hair, but I don’t remember where...I’ll have to ask her later.”

He carefully didn't watch as the kid hesitated before ducking his head under briefly, focusing on breaking a corner of the soap off and carefully keeping it in his fingers as he smushed it into goop in his hands, with the addition of a little water. If that memory involved drowning, the boy didn't need someone watching him work up the nerve.

"Go ahead and unbraid it, then turn your back to me, okay?"

He saw the kid's nod out of the corner of his eye, and by the time he had enough soap goop ready, he found Xiao waiting with his hair unbraided. Bosacius started with the long part, working soap into the length and scrubbing it carefully against itself until a carefully tested section squeaked when he pulled his fingers along it. Then he dropped it back in the water and scraped the rest of the softened soap he'd prepared into a hand to use on the kid's scalp.

To his surprise, the moment he started massaging it in, Xiao practically collapsed back onto him. He leaned forward, worried...

...only to find a little smile on the kid's face, his eyes closed.

Apparently, the kid *really* liked his scalp scritch. That was useful information for later, it might help him calm down. He smiled and went back to work on Xiao's scalp, glad the kid was getting to enjoy something for once.

He was even more careful testing the hair near the scalp for the clean squeak, mindful that it would probably be a very bad time to accidentally pull.

"Alright, I think that's it. Go ahead and rinse it all out, and we'll head up to the soaking pool for a bit."

Xiao showed less hesitation in ducking under this time, and when he finished, they switched pools and settled in.

If Bosacius had his way, they'd stay there until Xiao showed signs of boredom. The kid really needed a break.

Menogias didn't want to wake up. He felt absolutely miserable, and common sense told him he should roll over and try to sleep off whatever this was.

But then he remembered, and shot upright. Which was a bad idea, apparently - he groaned and clutched his head, waiting for his brain to stop sloshing around in his skull.

"There you are. How are you feeling?"

He winced in anticipation, but to his surprise there was no sudden jab at his skull. So...whatever this was, the migraine was gone, at least.

"Terrible. Please tell me I'm remembering wrong."

Madame Ping chuckled softly. He felt her palm against his forehead, and a moment later his headache and the twisting in his stomach eased.

“You're probably remembering right. Fortunately, you were slurring badly enough that I'm pretty sure Morax didn't understand most of it, and he's too much of a blockhead to make any connections with the rest.”

He groaned again, putting his face in his hands. It could be worse. It could be much worse. But it was clear he'd said enough that Madame Ping, at least, had figured it out.

“Please, please don't tell anyone.”

“I'm not one to go spilling my patients' secrets, Menogias. You know that. No matter how juicy the gossip.”

He lowered his hands from flaming cheeks and *looked* at the healer, who simply smiled back at him.

“Next time, maybe don't overdose on the qingxin, hmm? And if you ever want to talk about it with someone, I'm here.”

She hesitated for a moment.

“And, overdose or not, thank you. I don't think we could've saved the boy without you.”

“He's alright then?”

“Bosacius hasn't barged in here in a panic, so I assume so. I haven't had a chance to examine him, yet. I woke up not long before you did.”

Menogias suddenly realized she wasn't in the usual chair, but rather a cot that wasn't normally in the patient rooms. She must've stayed here to keep an eye on him...no wonder, with how he'd been acting.

“Thank you.”

“I'm your healer, too, you know. Stay as long as you need to, I'm going to go and put together some food for anyone who wants it.”

Once the door closed behind her, Menogias' head sunk into his hands again.

'Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.'

He didn't know what had possessed him to eat so many qingxin wafers. He'd known it was Madame Ping's entire supply, and that she'd trusted his good sense not to take more than he'd needed...but he remembered munching on them like they were a snack, instead of treating them like the medicine they were. And the things he'd said...even slurred...thank Celestia Indy hadn't been there, she'd never have let him hear the end of it. ‘Beds are fun’? What was he *thinking*?

Madame Ping smiled as she closed the door. She knew Menogias, and she knew Morax; that crush of his wouldn't go anywhere, but she hoped he got some enjoyment while it lasted. More importantly, Bosacius and the child had probably woken hours ago, and the yaksha at least must be starving, if he hadn't helped himself to her kitchen. Which likely entirely depended on whether he or Xiao had woken up first.

She had just started pulling out ingredients when the outer door opened, and she was startled to see Bosacius carrying a very damp and patently sound asleep Xiao. She looked a question at him and he held up a finger before heading down the hall. A couple minutes later he returned and sat at her kitchen table with a sigh.

"He fell asleep in the soaking pool, and I saw no reason to wake him. Poor kid's been through hell, he needs the rest. Are you making breakfast?"

The healer chuckled as his gut released a deep growl.

"I am. I take it he's doing better this morning then, if you were able to get him to take a bath?"

"Much better, I think, though we still have a lot to learn about what to avoid. He had a flashback on the way down."

Bosacius was silent for a moment, and she let him take his time as she started mixing up a savory batter. It was hardly unexpected, and at least they could start working more on that aspect of things now. It would be easier for the child's mind to recover, if his mind wasn't causing him more problems every time he turned around.

"Madame Ping...you saw the parts of his underwings where feathers were pulled out, right?"

"Of course. I need to talk to some bird adepti about it, this afternoon if I can, and a couple other things. I'm not sure why the feathers aren't growing back."

"I...I'm pretty sure he pulled them himself. At least some of them."

She stilled for a moment, then set down the bowl.

"Why do you think that?"

"He pulled some this morning, when he was trying to calm himself down after the flashback. Madame Ping, I'm not sure what to do...he hides in his wings to calm down, and that's fine, I don't want to disrupt that, but if he's hurting himself sometimes in there...Normally I'd distract a kid with something to play with, but I don't think that'll work here."

"No, no it wouldn't, not if it's when he's already needing to close himself off...I'll bring it up this afternoon. Maybe we'll be lucky and it'll be something common enough among bird adepti, and they'll know how to settle it."

The big yaksha sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair.

"Thank you. If they don't have an answer...I don't know. We might have to just hope it goes away as he improves."

The healer chopped more ingredients to use as toss-ins as a companionable silence settled over the kitchen. She'd just started the batter sizzling when Bosacius spoke up again.

“If you’re heading out anyway, could you drop off some messages for me? It doesn’t look like Xiao’s going to let go of this new attachment any time soon, so I need to sort out arrangements to manage things tomorrow with that in mind.”

“Of course. There’s paper in the drawer by the door as always, if you need it.”

“Thanks.”

Quiet descended on the pair again, save for the scratch of pen on paper and the sounds of cooking. Madame Ping didn’t mind. She’d take her moments of peace where she could get them.

Chapter End Notes

Me: Hurrah! Finally we're to the bath chapter!

Xiao: But but....-trauma, musings and doom-

Bosacius: -trying to not freak out over evidence of selfharm-

Me:.....-takes almost 4k words just to get the boy in the freaking water- You two are doing this to me on purpose, aren't you....

New Information

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the long wait! I blame Kaeya. He stole my brain there for a bit.

Trigger warnings for this chapter: Nightmare of doom, addiction, food issues, extremely low selfworth

As always, please let me know if I missed any triggers. I'm usually trying to come up with the list far too late at night...

The water in the pool was warm, almost hot. Xiao found his face stretching in that unfamiliar way again as he looked across the water at the mighty one, who smiled back. It was so...peaceful. He wished it could be like this forever.

The mighty one opened his mouth to speak, and blood dripped from his lips. Xiao shrieked and splashed, trying to reach him, to help, but he couldn't move, the water was too thick, he was too slow...

"Don't worry, little one. You're safe. That's what matters, what always matters, isn't it?"

The water thickened, grew warmer, and Alatus realized he was pushing his way through a pool, an ocean of blood...the mighty one was so pale, but somehow stood, glaring down at him.

"You let me die for you. You killed me, the same as all these others."

He gestured, and realized there were bodies floating in the ocean, so many bodies marked with wounds from his spear, bodies large and small and the blood he'd spilled was so deep he couldn't reach the bottom.

"I didn't want to! I'm so sorry, please..."

It dragged at him, half-clotted strings draping across his face as he went under and was pulled out again by a large arm around his middle. He twisted to see, protests dying on his lips as he saw Bosacius, kind Bosacius, smiling down at him.

Then the smile was gone, and the yaksha was glaring down at him with hatred instead.

"You killed children. How could you kill a child?"

The arms were holding him too tight, and two huge hands lifted to fit themselves around his throat. Xiao choked and gasped, scrabbling at Bosacius' arms, trying to breathe...

"The mighty one is right. You bring death and pain to everything you touch, a true disciple of Moharus. I can't let you taint my lord's realm."

He pried at Bosacius' hands, mouthed protests that he didn't want to, that he'd sworn not to, that he'd never do so again...but it didn't matter, and his arms went limp as he weakened.

Bosacius jerked and stared at him in surprise, then fell backward to float on the blood, Xiao's

spear sticking straight out from his chest.

“No...no, please, I couldn't have, no...”

He fell to his knees on the stone, staring at his hands in horror. Not Bosacius. Not him, too. Tears streamed down his face as he looked up, then past Bosacius' body to see dozens, hundreds more, still breathing, staring blankly at the sky.

*“No, no, I-I didn't, I **wouldn't**, I swore I wouldn't...”*

“You swore to the contract. And you broke it.”

Xiao whirled around and fell sprawling on the floor. Master Morax loomed over him, angry and enormous with his power.

*“You broke your contract, harmed my people, **murdered** my marshal after all he did for you. Such actions must be punished.”*

Xiao shook his head in mute horror and denial, but it did nothing, not that he expected it to. He deserved this anyway. He knew he did.

Master Morax slowly raised a hand to point at him, the ground trembled, and -

Xiao snapped awake with a gasp, immediately feeling around for other presences. Master Morax wasn't here, but neither was Bosacius, *where was Bosacius* he couldn't be dead it was just a dream he couldn't be he didn't actually...

Bosacius' presence was in the kitchen.

He teleported to the yaksha's side before he registered anything further, and froze for a moment when he realized there was another person there, another one he'd encountered before, *unpredictable, chaotic...*

Quickly, Xiao shifted between the two. He didn't trust the bright one. He would not risk her hurting Bosacius. He was not permitted to fight, but he could be a shield.

Bosacius couldn't help but jump when Xiao suddenly appeared next to him in a swirl of anemo. To his surprise, the kid immediately moved to place himself between him and Indy, and went into a defensive crouch.

“Xiao...little whirlwind, what are you...”

His sister was almost in tears. What look was the kid giving her?

.....was he *growling*?!

He reached for Xiao's shoulder, trying to turn him around to meet his gaze, but the little whirlwind resisted with more strength than he should have had...what in *Teyvat* had brought this on?

"Xiao, Indarias is not a threat. You met her before, remember? She's my fellow yaksha, my sister, she won't harm you..."

The growling slowly faded, and the kid's posture shifted slightly.

"Sister?"

"Yes. She and the other generals are as siblings to me. We have fought and lived together for centuries."

There was a tense silence for a few moments, then Xiao slipped from his grasp like the whirlwind he'd named him, and was suddenly on the floor prostrating himself before the pyro yaksha.

"This one apologizes for his assumptions and unwarranted aggression."

Bosacius stared at him dumbfounded. This was...not the behavior he'd come to expect from the whirlwind. Parts of it were, but...ah. Of course his reaction to fear would differ, now that he was no longer weakened by that structure.

Indy spoke up before he could.

"It's...it's okay, Xiao. I understand, I scared you before and...I'm really sorry for that. Can you forgive me?"

"There is no reason for bright one to apologize. Bright one did nothing wrong. It is this one who reacted inappropriately. This one had no right to flee."

Both yaksha flinched. Bosacius sighed. They still had such a long way to go.

"Indy, can you relay my request to the others? I think I need to talk to Xiao..."

She nodded and bit her lip.

"I'm so sorry..."

And she was gone in a swirl of harmless flames. Moments later, Xiao was hugging him around the middle and shaking.

Was all the aggression just a show? If it was, this might be easier to manage...he gently guided the kid to a chair and sat down himself, shifting his own chair closer so he could rub the boy's shoulders while he waited for him to calm down.

"Can you tell me what all that was about?"

Xiao froze, staring at his knees. He sighed softly - he'd hoped they'd moved past this, a little.

"You're not in trouble. I just want to know what had you feeling so threatened, so we can avoid it in the future."

"...I didn't feel threatened."

“Then why were you growling at Indarias?”

Xiao glanced at him and away, then pulled his legs up and hugged them to his chest. Bosacius’ heart sank as the silence dragged on, and he began to wonder if it had been a mistake to leave Xiao’s room while the whirlwind slept. Was this reaction the result of another nightmarish flashback? Of a battle, maybe?

“Little whirlwind...”

“I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

He blinked.

That...was not a reason he would have thought of. He wondered whether this was a good sign or not - it could be either a sign of being able to look beyond his own fear and pain, or it could just be another indicator of how incredibly little value the kid put on his own life.

“You don’t need to protect me, little whirlwind. I can defend myself very well, and you’re still healing. You’re here to heal and *be* protected, not *to* protect, remember?”

The little whirlwind just huddled tighter within his shoulders, and to his dismay, Bosacius saw the shine of tears start to gather in his eyes. This was...not going well. He wasn’t sure how to handle this. He’d never had one of his kids decide to try to protect *him* before...but then, they weren’t warriors. Xiao was.

One thing he *did* know. This was not likely to be a short discussion, and the kitchen was probably not the best place for it. While it was a comfortable and familiar place for *him*, for Xiao it was probably anything but, and if nothing else the chair was probably interfering from him summoning his wings. He very much suspected that posture was indicative of wanting to hide in them.

“Would you prefer we discuss this somewhere else, little whirlwind? We could move outside, or to your room...”

The kid nodded, gaze still low, and grabbed for one of the yaksha’s hands. He let the boy take it, figuring he meant to lead him somewhere - but instead, wind swirled around him, and he found himself standing between a large bush and a wall.

It took a moment to figure out where they were - he’d never seen the alcove from this perspective before. It certainly made for a good hiding place. He’d have to remember it the next time he ticked off Cloud Retainer...but there were larger concerns now. He looked down as he felt his hand released to find, as expected, that the kid had already hidden in his wings.

So he sat down in the grass facing him, and waited for Xiao to be ready.

It took awhile. He was increasingly sure that *something* had shaken the little whirlwind up before he’d even appeared in the kitchen, and was worried it had been his absence. The kid had apparently found him right away, so he was pretty sure he’d been right about the kitchen being within the range of Xiao’s senses...he’d thought that would be enough. Maybe not.

One of many things they needed to discuss...

Finally, Xiao relaxed his wings. He didn’t fold them back, but he wasn’t truly hiding in them anymore either. The traces of tears on his cheeks were expected, but still hurt.

“Please don’t protect me.”

Bosacius' heart broke at the pain and pleading in Xiao's voice.

"Why don't you want me to protect you, little whirlwind?"

"...I don't want you to *die*."

The remains of his heart seized, and he felt like an idiot. Just yesterday morning, Xiao had thought he was dead. No wonder he was so worried.

He opened his arms wide, and Xiao's wings vanished as he promptly climbed into the yaksha's lap, huddling within Bosacius' arms and trembling. He made soothing noises, stroking the boy's hair, skritchng at his scalp a little with every other pass.

"It's alright, I'm here, I'm alive. I won't die easy, I promise. Shh, it's okay..."

It took awhile for the trembling to stop, but less time than he feared.

Protecting Xiao was *technically* part of his duties, given the boy's contract with his lord, but he suspected this was not the best time to point that out. He couldn't have the little whirlwind reacting that way tomorrow though, if he followed through with the arrangements he'd been making all afternoon...

"Little whirlwind?"

"Hmm?"

The kid craned his head back to look at him, blinking, and his own neck hurt in sympathy.

"Why did you react so strongly to Indarias' presence? Was it because you didn't expect her to be there? Because you didn't know her well?"

Xiao's face twisted and he looked down again, beginning to tense back up, but he didn't answer.

"I know you meant well, Xiao. And I certainly don't mind that you don't want me hurt. But I don't want *you* hurt, either, and reacting like that could cause someone to attack you who otherwise wouldn't."

"I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I'm just trying to understand, so I can help. I would like to let you come along for some of my duties tomorrow, but I can't do that if you're not ready. I don't want you or anyone else getting hurt."

His head snapped back up, eyes wide and fearful.

"You're leaving?!"

Of *course* that's what he'd pull from his words. Bosacius sighed.

"I'm not headed out to battle or anything, as far as I know. But I do have to leave the subspace for at least part of the day, and while they may agree to meet here, I do need to meet up with the generals. As much as I would like to stay here with you until you recover, little whirlwind, I have my own contract, and duties I have to fulfill."

Xiao swallowed and nodded, looking down again.

”...I understand.”

It was the barest whisper, laced with resignation and despair, and Bosacius wished he had a way to just wipe away those emotions for good. Xiao had actually been *content* that morning. He’d *enjoyed* something.

Recovery was not a straight line. He knew this.

He took a deep breath, and blew it out.

“I don’t think you do. I’m not saying I have to leave you behind. I’m saying I want to find a way that you can come with me, *safely*. Morax has agreed that if I judge you ready, you may join me tomorrow, so long as you return here by nightfall and if an emergency arises.”

“Y-you want me to come with you?”

“I do, if you want to. There are some other kids I’ve been helping, and I’d like you to meet them - but not if you’re going to terrify them the moment one of them runs towards me too suddenly or something. Every one of them has been through a lot, if not so much as you have.”

Xiao shrunk into himself a little, and Bosacius gave him time to think. He doubted the kid had ever had a chance to socialize normally with other children - that was part of why he wanted this. The group he’d been working with all knew how to deal with kids who’d been through hell, because *they* had, and because as soon as they were in a place to look outside themselves, he taught them how to help each other. They wouldn’t bully or ignore Xiao for being strange, and they wouldn’t push him past what he was ready for. If he panicked, they all knew how not to make it worse, and to get Bosacius or a healer. There was likely no better group to get him used to interacting with others.

“I...I want to try.”

He smiled.

“I’m glad. Is there anything that could make this easier? That would help you to *not* feel the need to get defensive, like you did earlier?”

“M-maybe...if you told me what to expect first? Before each thing?”

“Of course. And we can go over things now, too, if you like.”

His little whirlwind nodded, and he set to explaining his schedule for the next day. He made sure to describe the people involved, show that they were *people*, and not threats, and good ones, too.

The meeting with the generals was in the morning. It would serve as a good test run before meeting with his kids in the afternoon. And if Xiao could get through both...

Morax entered his personal subspace with a sigh of relief. It had been a long morning filled with

the sorts of things Guizhong had always been better at - meetings with his civilian leaders, reassuring them that he and the yaksha wouldn't let Sinaria's forces through, that her attack had failed, meeting with others to ensure that they had the supplies to last if she got more serious and managed to cut off their access to lands outside his realm, reassuring both groups that - despite the rumors - Marshal Vritras, General Kapisas and himself were just fine, simply busy with matters that weren't their concern.

Not *strictly* true in Menogias' case...but Madame Ping had assured him the yaksha *would* be fine once he'd had a chance to sleep everything off, so it was close enough.

He rubbed at his head as he walked deeper into his home, taking an easily-missed side corridor that led down. The stone became steadily less refined until it looked like a natural cave, then opened up into a large, domed area, reminiscent of some nameless cave from the depths. He passed by the crystal garden and spring, turning left down another corridor that ended in a small room, the walls worked to resemble bookcases, complete with stone books and scrolls that almost looked as though they could be read.

His research room.

Madame Ping was not going to be happy with him. She'd told him to go sleep as soon as he finished his meetings, and truthfully, she was right - he had not gotten nearly the rest he should have, since the battle with Moharus. But something about the sight of the boy and his wings had tickled at the old dragon's memory. It felt important, but for the life of him he could not remember *what* it made him think of, unaided. Even with the aid this room provided, it would be faster and easier to chase down the elusive memory while that tickle was fresh.

And technically, meditation *was* rest, so...

Morax settled himself on the raised circle in the middle of the room, and set the threads of cor lapis running through the stone 'shelves' to glowing softly. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and focused *in*.

It took longer than usual for the mental representation of the space to fill his senses, the stone books to seem real, and filled with his knowledge. He must be even more tired than he thought, if he was having trouble with this. The simple mental construct was something Guizhong had helped him design not long after they'd met; a way of organizing his memories, and making it easier to search through them at need.

After all, thousands of years of perfect memory made for rather a lot of information to sift through.

With any luck, this search would at least give him a lead on finding the child's family. While he would be glad to take Xiao in more permanently once he was healed, if that was what he wanted, the god knew the importance of one's kin. Even if his immediate family was gone - unfortunately likely, he could not see the child's parents giving him up without a fight - surely there would be broader kin, family friends, the others of his particular kind of adepti birdkin, who would want him back. Who should know he was still alive, and who *Xiao* should know he had waiting.

He took a deep breath in and held it, focusing on the image of the child, the way those wings sprung from his back, the style of wing and the patterning of his feathers. Then he turned, blowing the sense of *Xiao* over all the books and scrolls, making sure to coat them all in his exhale.

When he was done, two books and a scroll glowed softly with a golden light.

The first book concerned the various kinds of adepti, and the forms they tended to choose to take.

Morax closed his eyes and pressed a hand to it, seeking within. Bird adepti usually preferred to use their true forms unchanged, or occasionally a human form for convenience for short periods. When they took human form, it was generally wingless, their wings becoming their arms instead of new limbs being added. The point of the human form, after all, was convenience - and wings of a size to be useful on a human could be rather awkward to manage, especially indoors. There was one tightly knit clan that was different, that took a mostly-human form the majority of the time, but could not bear to spend all that time flightless so included wings on the otherwise human backs...but there was nothing more on them in this segment of memory.

He felt drawn to the scroll next, and walked over, resting his palm on it. Prominent clans of adepti, from before the war? No wonder he'd had trouble recalling this on his own. It was hardly a topic he thought on much, these days. He sunk his awareness into the construct, using the thread from the first book to search.

Before the Archon War, there had been a clan of bird adepti - healers, mostly, though they were well able to protect themselves. They'd had an unusual ability...his mind fogged for a moment, and he struggled to focus. They'd been able to interact with dreams, and through them, with souls, far more directly than other adepti could manage, even with rituals and group ceremonies. They had used this ability to heal - not bodies, but minds and hearts. As many of those they helped were human, they took a human shape with wings, so their patients would be more comfortable. They were called...he pushed harder, but could only recall titles. The Walkers of Dreams, the Healers of a Thousand Hearts. Casually referred to as Dreamwalkers or Hearthealers. Perhaps he'd never actually learned the clan's name.

At the start of the Archon War, they had disappeared somewhere, stating that they refused to aid or be used by the gods vying for power.

Morax frowned as he pulled his hand away. A clan of healers? For one such to be twisted to such purposes as Moharus had forced on that child...the irony that his own people specialized in exactly the sort of healing he needed now did not escape him. But if they'd hidden away...would he be able to find them in time to help Xiao? He was a god, precisely what they were hiding from, what their defenses would be designed to evade.

Perhaps the last book held a clue.

He turned towards it, and the thread pulling him seemed to drip with blood. Apparently, easy to recall or not, his subconscious knew what he would find was not going to be pleasant...he braced himself, and touched the book's spine.

A collection of those things, places, and peoples who were lost, changed, or harmed during the war. Ah. Yes, no wonder the thread dripped. He focused inwards...

He'd had no particular reason to keep track of the Dreamwalkers, having not interacted with them himself. Nonetheless, they had been well enough regarded before the war that when they were found, news spread like wildfire. Especially since they were slaughtered by those who'd found them, every last one supposed to be dead. 146 years ago, the clan had been destroyed by -

Moharus, and his allies.

Of course.

Morax absently wondered if the young Alatus had been a lucky find, one who'd almost escaped, or if Moharus had signaled the attack once he had his prize.

They'd probably never know.

He let the construct fade, resting his head in his hands and struggling not to weep. He had his answers. He might not like them, but he had them.

How could he tell the boy he was the last of his kind?

Should he tell him?

Eventually he'd have to, of course. But the child was already dealing with so much right now...he'd have to tell Bosacius, at least. Before he filled Xiao's head with the idea that Morax was looking for his family. It would be easier, probably, if his hopes hadn't already been raised when he had to destroy them...

He would also have to make it very clear that Xiao had a home here, if he wanted it. That he would not just send the child out into the world to fend for himself, once the contract was complete.

He didn't know how to approach this. The news should probably come from him - both about his kin, and that he had a home. It was his responsibility. But the timing, and how to handle the topics both so he didn't hurt the child further, and so that he was *believed*... He would have to consult with Madame Ping. Or Bosacius. Or both.

....Madame Ping would undoubtedly refuse to speak with him until he'd slept, barring an urgent emergency.

With a heavy sigh, Morax started back up the corridor. He truly was exhausted, and there was no reason this news couldn't wait a few hours.

Madame Ping groaned as she climbed to the mountaintop the bird adepti insisted on meeting her atop. How had she gotten so out of shape? She was an adeptus, climbing a mountain should be nothing. Perhaps it would be, she supposed, if she hadn't been working herself to her limits and beyond for the last week. At least they should be past the worst of it, now. She could get some extra rest tomorrow.

She reached the top, muscles burning and limp, but thankfully not gasping for breath. That would just be embarrassing. Cloud Retainer and Mountain Shaper were waiting, and dipped their beaks in acknowledgement as she approached.

"Mountain Shaper, Cloud Retainer, thank you for meeting with me."

"Of course. But one must ask, you said you needed assistance in tending to a bird adepti - none of the ones we know are injured or ill. Is the one you refer to, perhaps, the child we have heard our Lord has taken under his wing?"

The healer dipped her head towards Mountain Shaper.

"It is as you suppose. The child, Xiao, has turned out to be a bird adeptus. We don't know what his

true form is yet, precisely, but the feathered wings on his back are undeniable - and grievously injured.”

Madame Ping winced internally, both at the shock both of her fellow adepti portrayed, and the formal tone she always wound up adopting around them. She waited for them to calm.

“I have done what I can magically, but there are older injuries and other concerns I am unsure how to approach. He is missing a large percentage of feathers, and they do not appear to be showing any signs of growing back, as an example.”

Cloud Retainer ruffled her feathers and shifted her feet agitatedly.

“You cannot expect one to accurately diagnose problems without seeing the patient, surely!”

“But one may still offer opinions where things are obvious, can we not, Cloud Retainer? I apologize, this news is quite upsetting to both of us.”

She bowed her head at the bird adepti briefly.

“No apologies are necessary. I quite understand.”

“Regarding the lack of growth, is it that the child is malnourished? Growing feathers requires a great deal of resources from one’s body, and may not begin if they are not available, even for an adeptus.”

“It is so, Mountain Shaper. Xiao is...quite starved, though we are trying to remedy that situation. Should the feathers begin to grow on their own, as his feeding improves, then?”

“It should.”

She heaved a sigh of relief. That was one less worry.

“There is another concern, that was brought to my attention only this morning, and I ask your discretion on this matter.”

She waited for their nods before continuing.

“The child has been witnessed...pulling out his feathers, unconsciously, when stressed. We’re not sure how to approach this - “

Cloud Retainer interrupted her, squawking and flapping her wings.

“The chick is plucking?! What have you done to him! Where is he - “

She, too, was interrupted, as Mountain Shaper pecked at her a few times and then yelled at their fellow bird adeptus in turn.

“Cloud Retainer! The healer has come to us for *aid*, it is unlikely she is complicit in his injuries! Calm yourself!”

Cloud Retainer shifted and grumbled, glaring at Mountain Shaper for a long moment before heaving a sigh and turning to Madame Ping.

“One supposes this is to be expected in one so injured and unwell as you describe. Plucking is a stress behavior among avian kind, adeptus or wild, and should stop when the stress stops. Interference will only increase the stress, so as unpleasant as it may be, do not seek to prevent it,

though you should take care the wounds left behind do not become infected.”

Two problems so far that would solve themselves, in time...perhaps Madame Ping had been ahead of herself, being so pessimistic. Though, given how things had gone so far, she supposed it was only natural to be worried.

“Thank you, that is a relief to hear. Is there anything else I should know, in general? Any reason not to treat injuries the same as I would on any other?”

The two bird adepts hesitated and looked at each other for a moment, then Mountain Shaper stepped forward.

“Not the wounds themselves, assuming there is nothing else...unusual...but perhaps the placement. If there are wounds on his underwings, close to his back...that area is considered very intimate, for bird adepts. If you *must* treat him there, touch the area as little as possible, and do not in any way move the feathers in a manner similar to stroking or preening. Similarly, do not, under any circumstances, apply a steady pressure to the part of his back between his wings, if it can be helped. Both such actions would be...very distressing, for one.”

She swallowed, suddenly very glad she’d asked. It would have been very easy for her to cause the boy additional trauma without this information...a hand supporting the back like that would generally be considered comforting, for most others.

“Thank you. I believe you may have saved me from potentially making a grave misstep. May I call upon the two of you later in his healing, if I need assistance again?”

This time it was Cloud Retainer who stepped forward.

“But of course. One is always willing to help a fellow bird adeptus, especially a child. But...one must ask. You stated that this chick’s wings were grievously injured. How grievously? Will he be able to fly, when they are healed?”

Both adepts stared at her, and Madame Ping couldn’t meet their gazes.

“I don’t know. I had hoped to get your opinion on the damage to his bones and musculature at a later date, along with your thoughts on exercises to help those areas recover, but I don’t believe he could handle meeting more adepts at this time.”

“One sees.”

The two exchanged another glance, and Mountain Shaper flew off. Cloud Retainer spread her wings, but looked back before taking flight.

“If the chick may be too injured to ever learn to fly, Madame Ping, one suggests you not get too attached. A grounded bird does not live long.”

And with a mighty flap of her wings, the bird adeptus was gone.

The room felt crowded with two beds in it, but it meant Bosacius was going to stay the night where Xiao could keep an eye on him, so it didn't bother him. He could teleport again, anyway, it wasn't like the beds were obstacles...

Bosacius walked in behind him, and Xiao couldn't quite keep the scowl from his face when he saw the mug in the yaksha's hand.

"It's not drugged this time, I promise."

He *knew* that.

"I don't require food. Or...whatever *that* is."

Bosacius sighed, and sat on the edge of the new bed.

"I know that's what Moharus told you, but it isn't true. We don't *die* for lack of food, true, but your body still needs sustenance to grow, to heal, to use your powers to their full extent - "

"My powers are fine."

He demonstrated by teleporting to his own bed, and glared at the mug. The stuff was *disgusting*.

"...what about your wings? Madame Ping said the reason your feathers aren't growing in is malnutrition. I realize broth isn't the most...exciting...food option, but we have to start gentle until your body is used to food again."

Bosacius wasn't getting it. He didn't need food, he never had, every time he remembered trying it he felt sick and it *never* tasted good. The only thing that didn't upset his stomach was dreams, and he'd rather not eat *anything* than those.

...but the thought of his wings healing, fully, being able to fly someday...

It was hard to imagine. He didn't really remember a time when they hadn't been broken and burned and half-bare, except that... *one* day...and he tried not to remember that. But whether he could imagine it or not, some part of him always felt called to the sky...he found himself staring out the window, and swallowed hard.

For a chance at the sky...he could drink that disgusting stuff.

Maybe.

Bosacius wanted him to drink it.

Groaning, Xiao stuck out his hand and took the mug, drinking it as quickly as possible. He shoved the empty mug back at Bosacius and scrubbed at his mouth, then saw the water pitcher on the table and promptly tried to wash the taste out. That stuff was *nasty*.

He heard chuckling, and turned to see Bosacius covering his mouth with one hand. He huffed.

"I told you. It's disgusting."

"Sorry, I shouldn't laugh. But next time..."

Xiao looked where the yaksha was pointing...and saw two cups on the table near the pitcher.

He probably should have used one...

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s fine. The water’s mostly for you, anyway. I’ll take this to the kitchen, and then we should get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

Pulling his legs up onto the bed as he waited, Xiao couldn’t help but think about the mighty one. He couldn’t escape the similarities. Both inexplicably cared about him, tried to get him to eat, helped him and tried to protect him...both encouraged him to loosen up around them, and didn’t get mad at him for being uppity.

He was so very, very afraid they’d end the same way, too.

When Bosacius came back, Xiao scooted back on the bed and laid down. He still didn’t like lying down, it brought...memories...but he had no intention of sleeping, and didn’t want to argue about it, and maybe if he stayed down until Bosacius fell asleep he wouldn’t question it.

It seemed to work. The yaksha smiled when he came in and saw Xiao already lying down, and blew out the lamp before climbing into the other bed.

“Sleep well, little whirlwind. Don’t be afraid to wake me if you have a nightmare, I’m here for you.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“Sleep well...”

Bosacius didn’t respond, and after awhile, faint snores came from his end of the room. Xiao slowly sat up, and waited - but there was no change. The yaksha was solidly asleep, it seemed.

Hopefully he *did* sleep well. Xiao knew he...had caused rather a lot of trouble for him. A good night’s sleep was the least the man deserved.

He pulled his knees up and rested his chin on them, watching the large lumpy shape that was Bosacius. It was going to be a long night, but he’d had longer. He didn’t really need sleep, and if he stayed awake he wouldn’t risk worrying Bosacius again.

He’d forgotten about dreams. How had he forgotten about dreams?

Partway through the night the scent reached him, and he jerked his head up to see the faint glow over Bosacius head. The sickeningly sweet smell filled his nostrils, and he couldn’t escape it, not without leaving, and he couldn’t leave, he had to watch over Bosacius...his stomach roiled, clenching in anticipation of being filled, and he ignored it. A part of him wanted that dream so *badly*, and he hated that part of himself, would rip it out if he could. He clenched his eyes shut, hugging his legs tighter, and images of Bosacius looking blank, empty, left as a husk filled his head.

No.

He wouldn’t.

He would never, not Bosacius, not *anyone*, never again.

If Master Morax ordered him to after this contract was over, he'd...he'd...

And Xiao wept, because he knew he was a coward, that he'd probably follow orders even as he hated every minute of it. He should die first. He *deserved* to die. But he didn't want to, and he didn't know why, and it hurt...

After a long while, Bosacius' dream ended, and the scent faded to more bearable levels, though more came from elsewhere in the subspace.

Xiao gripped his legs so tightly his knees creaked, and hid in his wings, and endured.

It was a very long night.

Sharing Information

Chapter Notes

Things were getting too long, and I had to split the chapter in half, so this one's a little shorter than average. Sorry! Pretty sure next chapter will be longer though.

TW this chapter: Uhhhh...actually, I don't think there are any? If I'm wrong, feel free to correct me in the comments or on discord, and I'll update this for future readers.

Madame Ping blinked as she felt the subspace entrance being used, then frowned and dusted off her hands as she recognized Morax's presence. Breakfast could wait, if her lord was up this early after the week they'd all had... She met him halfway down the hall, and looked him over critically. He clearly hadn't had enough rest yet.

"What has you up here so early, when you should still be resting?"

He actually flinched, and she winced. She hadn't *meant* to sound that sharp...yet. That might change, depending on what he had to say.

"I apologize. I will rest more later, but...there is a matter weighing on my mind, that perhaps you could aid me with?"

He glanced briefly at the door they were standing in front of, and met her gaze.

"Privately?"

Something he didn't want Xiao to hear, apparently...she couldn't help but start to worry immediately. When was there ever *good* news regarding that poor child? She nodded and led him to her sitting room, growing more disturbed when instead of taking his usual seat, the god began to pace.

"Morax, what's wrong?"

The dragon huffed and finally sat, not meeting her gaze.

"Something about Xiao's appearance, with his wings, tickled my memory, but I had trouble recalling exactly what it reminded me of, only that it was important. So when I returned home yesterday afternoon, I used my research room - "

"Morax!"

"I know, I was meant to be sleeping. But I could not, with this worrying my mind."

She huffed out a sigh. She should have expected something like this; he was as stubborn as the stone he wielded.

"Very well. What did you find?"

He eyed her warily, clearly expecting further argument.

“You have already said you’ll rest once this is dealt with, and I know how stubborn you are. So the fastest way to get you to *rest* is to hear you out. Remonstrances can wait.”

“I...see.”

He hesitated, and while he tried to keep his face neutral, she knew him well enough to see the sorrow in his eyes.

“Is it so terrible, what you found?”

Morax twitched at her soft words, then nodded.

“I know where he comes from, who his kin...were. They’re all gone, wiped out by Moharus over a century ago, probably within days of when he enslaved Xiao.”

It was like a dagger in the heart, and it took a long moment for her to lower the hand she didn’t remember raising to her mouth.

“*Why?* And who were they?”

Morax sighed.

“I...do not know much. They were never of particular interest to me, before now...they were a clan of healers, with unique inherent abilities relating to dreams. They were known, among other titles, as the Dreamwalkers...and really, the things Xiao was used for should have made it obvious. How many adepts are *capable* of such a thing as eating a dream?”

“He’s the only one I’ve ever heard of...”

“And very likely the last of his kind.”

Morax stared down at his clawed hands, and Madame Ping looked away, giving him a moment.

“I...need your advice. The boy deserves to know, eventually, but I...I am not *good* at this. I do not know if now is the right time, or if I should wait until he is more settled...and I do not know how to tell him. He has been through enough suffering, more than he should, and to add the loss of his family, any *friends* he may have had, atop that...”

Madame Ping swallowed and closed her eyes. She would’ve had a very different answer when the child first arrived, but now...it was very clear that if they wanted his trust, they couldn’t hold back information. Not any that related to him, at any rate.

This...was going to hurt him, though. And everyone else involved in his care, when they found out.

Had *anything* ever gone in any but the worst possible way, in this child’s life?

Perhaps...perhaps being brought here. Perhaps *they* could turn things around for him.

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

“You should tell him as soon as may be. Holding back this information will only damage his trust in us when he realizes how long we knew, and didn’t tell him. And...be gentle. Give him time to process; don’t rush it. And - should he allow you to comfort him physically, which I doubt - do *not* press on his back. Apparently, that is a very disturbing thing for bird adepts.”

The healer had already passed the warnings she’d received to Bosacius in a note, and would tell the

others when she could. It was best not to take chances.

The dragon heaved a sigh and dipped his head.

“Very well. He may be attending the generals’ meeting this morning; I will see if I can speak with him after.”

He stood, clearly weary, and moved to leave, pausing briefly to look at her.

“Thank you. I...would probably have made the wrong choice, without your advice.”

She managed a small smile for her old friend.

“You know you are always welcome to it, whether you wish it or not.”

A strained chuckle, and he was gone.

Madame Ping sat there for a long time, worrying how this would affect the young adeptus who, it now seemed, would likely be here for a long, long time. Then she remembered there was breakfast to cook, and shook herself.

When she got to the kitchen, she saw Bosacius and Xiao sitting at the table, each with a mug in front of them. The child froze when he saw her, but Bosacius distracted him immediately, apparently prodding him about the contents of his mug. When Xiao grimaced and downed it, she couldn’t help but smile.

He was healing. News of family he hadn’t seen in over a hundred years might set that back, but it wouldn’t stop it.

Not with all of them there to support him, the moment he was willing to accept it.

Bonanus was not used to giving comfort. But Bosacius was occupied with Xiao lately, which she could hardly blame him for, and Menogias hadn’t returned, so who else was going to?

She might be irritated by her...bubbliness...most of the time, but she was hardly going to ignore the way Indy had been in tears pretty much since she’d returned the afternoon before. So she said the same thing she’d been saying, over and over, since then...

“Indy, I’m sure he doesn’t hate you. He’s just been through a lot.”

“B-but he *growled* at me...he must’ve thought I was going to hurt him...”

Oh, she was going to be *so glad* to see Saish again, and pawn their sister off on him to deal with. She didn’t want Indy hurting, but she was *not good at this* and frankly, at this point it was getting irritating.

“If he did, I’m sure Saish set him straight. Look, we’ll see them both again in a few minutes, okay?”

So you'll be able to apologize again or whatever it is you want to do."

At least she wasn't crying anymore. Repeatedly reminding her that she was a general and should act like it on official business had eventually gotten through, and Indy had pulled herself together...somewhat. A good thing too...if the kid was going to be at the meeting, he'd probably find some way to blame himself if she showed she was upset, and think he was going to be punished or something.

She wasn't going to think about that right now. Not the way he'd thrown himself to the ground in front of her that first afternoon, not how...gone...he'd seemed when she'd been feeding him energy, not *any* of it.

She wasn't going to start crying too, damnit.

Even if he was the first kid who hadn't been scared off by her hands and he might be terrified of her now too...

Nope. Not going there.

The hydro yaksha practically shoved Indarias through the passthrough first, and was glad she had when she followed. Menogias had been waiting, and was already engulfed in a fiery hug as Indy failed to mind her hair *again*. At least the stuff didn't actually burn...

"Good to see you up and about. Do you need me to pry her off you?"

The geo yaksha chuckled and shook his head, but Indy had already whirled around to glare at her. Bonanus grinned back.

"I was worried! I'm allowed to be worried!"

"Suuure. Pretty sure you shouldn't be setting him on fire, though."

Indy's hair flared to twice its usual height, and Bonanus smirked.

"You *know* my flames don't burn! Nan!"

Mission accomplished. Indignant was far and away better than suppressing tears, and far less likely to set the kid off. Still, she had a reputation to uphold, so she rolled her eyes as she walked past her siblings into the building.

"Where are we meeting them, Menogias?"

"The dayroom."

The three were quiet as they walked down the hall, each lost in their own thoughts, though she could hear Indy's muttering behind her. The hydro yaksha tried to focus on her part of the reports, but...they were pretty routine. Nothing about the aftermath of the defense against Sinaria was really different from any other time some bastard god who used humans as cannon fodder came after them. It was hard not to get distracted by thoughts of Xiao...Indy had said that he'd probably be there, that Saish said he was much improved, but...those words kept intruding into her mind in their dead tone.

'This lowly one is well, gentle one.'

She didn't think she'd be able to get that out of her head until she'd seen him and heard him speak,

heard life in his voice.

The door to the dayroom was open and waiting, and she found Saish already seated at one of the larger tables, apparently speaking quietly with Xiao. On seeing them enter, the kid made an abortive motion like when they first met - she abruptly realized he was trying to prostrate himself, like when he'd apologized, and she...didn't like that. If he did, she'd get right back on the floor with him. She didn't like people thinking they were beneath her, and that seemed to work last time.

Instead, Xiao glanced at Saish, and bit his lip before bowing his head slightly.

"Th-thank you for being willing to meet here, honorable generals, and acquiescing to my presence. I will keep what I hear here to myself, and not discuss it with anyone not present."

Their marshal squeezed his shoulder and smiled at the kid before looking up at the rest of them, and Bonanus was very glad when Menogias spoke for them.

"It's no trouble at all. We're glad to see you doing so much better, Xiao."

Doing so much better...but he had looked much the same the day they'd met, before they collapsed. How much better was he, really? The structure was gone, theoretically, but how was his energy recovering? As the kid moved back to sit in one of the chairs by the windows, all too clearly watching Bosacius like a hawk, Bonanus stretched out her senses to check the strength of his presence - and had to hide her shock.

Oh, Xiao was *recovering* alright.

He already had more raw power than most of the yaksha.

In fact, he was almost to *her* level.

Just how powerful would this kid be, healthy and well-fed?

And how in *Teyvat* had Moharus forced him to do *anything*? Much less abused him to this level of deference...

Abruptly realizing she was staring like an idiot, She shook herself and went to take a seat at the table. Luckily, it didn't seem like anyone else had noticed her odd behavior. The meeting started with the marshal catching all of them up - though primarily Menogias - on the details of Sinaria's apparent strategy a couple days before, the composition of the armies she'd used, and what that might mean regarding her long-term plans. Saish believed the overuse of humans as cannon fodder indicated that this might have been just a test of their defenses, checking how quickly they responded and in what ways, prior to a more serious attack. She supposed that made sense, though it seemed wasteful - even for a god who didn't care about human lives, that was rather a lot of resources expended for just a *test*.

He concluded by telling them all to be on alert, because chances were good there'd be another attack in the next week or two, either a stronger test or a more serious attack, depending on whether she felt she'd gotten enough information. Then he turned to her for the reports on the wounded.

"A few of the junior yaksha managed to get themselves badly injured by getting the bright idea to take on her adepti alone, but it's nothing permanent. The healers are on it, and they'll be fighting fit in a few days. For the rest, minor injuries, about what you'd expect with a bunch of humans facing yaksha...though we did lose one scout who refused to stay out of the fighting."

A sigh went around the table. The scouts and borderwatch were supposed to stay out of battle

except in the last extreme of defense; it was why humans were allowed to serve in those segments of their military. Humans were no match against adepti with their elemental powers, and Morax refused to let them die in droves out of a misguided will to fight. But some of them could not be content with simply being protected - and honestly, Bonanus couldn't blame them. She'd probably feel the same.

"I'll have another talk with the scouts and borderwatch, reinforce our lord's ruling on the subject. When's the funeral?"

"In three days, but it's more of a memorial. It was a pyro adeptus he attacked, apparently there wasn't much left. The yaksha that was fighting that adeptus did report that the human's intervention prevented a major injury, for what it's worth."

"A life to prevent an injury is not a fair exchange, but I'll keep it in mind. Indy, how are the new recruits coming along?"

Bonanus tuned things out at that point. She had little to do with the recruits, except the very best with a sword...she was unsuited to teaching, for the most part. Fresh recruits didn't handle her disregard of their egos very well. The ones skilled enough to learn by getting their butt kicked in a spar were sent to her, and that was it.

She glanced over at Xiao. The kid was sitting there in that chair, perched on the edge still as stone, face blank as he watched Bosacius. Every once in awhile he'd jump a little when Indy would wave her arms about - the girl could not seem to talk without flapping them every which way - but that was it. She wondered what was running through his head...her mind was jerked back to the meeting as Saish spoke again.

"Lord Morax already checked on the state of our provisions yesterday - "

Menogias shifted uncomfortably, though his face remained neutral. Technically, keeping track of those was his responsibility, this rotation - she switched primary duties with him every decade or so.

" - because we didn't expect you to somehow keep up on them while *unconscious*, Menogias."

Apparently she wasn't the only one who'd noticed. She grinned. The geo yaksha tried hard not to show his emotions, but he really wasn't as good at it as he thought.

"We should have enough to cover for a month if Sinaria decides to try to cut our supply lines, possibly longer depending on how fishing does and how much we can teleport in as a last resort. I doubt she has the warriors or strategical mind to keep things up that long, so I don't consider it a major concern, and all of you can say as much to anyone who asks. I know a lot of the populace is likely concerned, given that Sinaria has one of the worst reputations out there, but she hasn't shown any sign of military brilliance that I'm aware of. We should be fine, so long as we stay alert and don't make stupid mistakes. Do we need to cover anything else today?"

Everyone shook their heads, and as they all gathered to leave - Menogias would be returning to the pavilion with her and Indarias - she hesitated, looking back at the kid.

The message Bosacius had sent had said the meeting would be hard enough on Xiao, and not to push him to socialize after. And really, she wasn't the social sort normally anyway...but she hoped he'd be up to more soon, anyway.

She wondered if Xiao would take to the sword...

Morax waited in the kitchen, fiddling with his cup of tea instead of drinking it. He sighed. This was hardly his first time delivering bad news. These days, his generals often handled the unpleasant task, but he had not always had such an army at his command. Still, it was his responsibility, in this case. The young adeptus was under no one's command but his own, if even that - there were no terms in their contract regarding obedience, or the following of orders, for all Xiao acted as though there were. He could not, *should not*, try to pass off this task to another. No matter how ill suited to it he might be.

He had spoken with Madame Ping. He had gotten her advice. He would do fine.

Finally, he felt the presences of his generals gather and leave the subspace, and rose to intercept his marshal and the child before they could go elsewhere. Luckily they seemed to be staying put for the moment...

When he reached the dayroom, he found Xiao already prostrated once more, and Bosacius trying to persuade him to rise. He sighed. He'd hoped the electro yaksha would have managed to dispel some of the child's fear of him, but perhaps that was something he could only do himself.

If he could just figure out how...

"Bosacius is correct, Xiao. There is no need for such subservience. As I have told you before, I do not require such gestures from my people."

Slowly, the boy rose to a kneeling position, his eyes lowered as they always seemed to be unless he was ordered otherwise.

"What's this about, Morax? Has something come up?"

Of course his marshal would assume he was here for him. That was only logical, given the recent attack.

"In a manner of speaking. Some information has come to light, and I would speak with Xiao privately, as it concerns him."

The boy started to shake, and it took a moment to figure out why. He cursed himself, he should have thought through his wording more...

"You are not in trouble, young one. This I promise. Bosacius, Madame Ping knows something of what this is about, if you wish to seek her out while you wait."

Bosacius gave him a long, grim look.

"Are you certain I must leave?"

No, truthfully he wasn't. However, he wanted the young adeptus free to think his *own* thoughts regarding the second half of the planned discussion, and he had no doubt that intended or not, the yaksha was a strong influence on him.

“Yes. Do not worry, I will be gentle with him.”

Why did that make the boy shake more? He tried, but nothing he had seen from this child made any sense to him. He hoped he wouldn't botch this completely.

Once Bosacius had left the room, he hesitated, then sat on the floor in front of the child. Best not to start things off with a debate over whether it was 'appropriate' for Xiao to seat himself comfortably. The young adeptus seemed to automatically reject anything that was for his own comfort and wellbeing, for some reason.

Unfortunately, if shaking was any indicator, sitting in front of him probably wasn't any better than the debate would have been. He was beginning to wonder if there *was* a good way to approach conversing with Xiao at this point in his recovery...

“Xiao, I meant what I told you. You are not in trouble, in any way. I simply have some information I believe you would prefer to receive privately, and an offer for you to ponder during the remainder of your recovery.”

He waited, but the boy's trembling did not lessen, and he did not respond. The dragon repressed a sigh, and continued.

“I believe I may have found word of your kin. Do either 'Dreamwalkers' or 'Hearthealers' mean anything to you?”

There was silence for a long moment before he received an answer.

“No, Master.”

He couldn't quite repress the flinch, no matter how often he heard that term applied to himself. But other matters were more important right now. If he didn't remember, maybe he had gotten it wrong? But no, Xiao seemed quite young, and would have been even younger when he was taken. It was possible he simply didn't remember. Too many details matched up.

“They were a clan of bird adepti, honorable healers, who specialized in healing through the manipulation of dreams. They preferred a winged human form, as you seem to, and were the only adepti I have ever heard of to have inherent abilities regarding dreams, as you do. They...were wiped out, 146 years ago. By Moharus and his allies.”

Remembering that he was supposed to take it slow, give Xiao time to process, he waited a moment, but the child didn't seem to react to the news in any way, oddly. Perhaps he was in shock?

“I am so sorry, child. I had hoped finding your family would mean finding your home, for you to return to when you were healed. I did not expect this.”

If anything, Xiao seemed confused, then he leaned forward in a seated bow, almost as deep as his earlier position.

“This one thanks you for your concern.”

“No thanks are necessary, Xiao. However...I would like to offer you a home here, in my lands, if you would like. You don't need to answer now, you will be remaining until you are fully healed regardless - but it is something for you to consider.”

Shock radiated through the boy's presence, for all he did not outwardly react. Why would that offer garner so much more of an emotional reaction than the reason for it?

Morax didn't understand.

He wasn't sure he ever would.

He'd have to talk to Madame Ping again...and maybe Bosacius...

"I...I will leave you to your thoughts then, and let Bosacius know I am done speaking with you. If...if you need anything, let me know."

Xiao only bowed deeper.

"Master is most generous, but this lowly one needs for nothing. This one is well."

He very much doubted it, but unlike his marshal, he doubted he would get through that wall anytime soon.

Concepts and Kids

Chapter Notes

So, Xiao took things over, and now it looks like what was originally going to be one chapter will be *three*....so enjoy part two of what was originally supposed to be part of last chapter XD

Trigger warnings: anxiety, intense confusion, panic attack, a little bit of gore in the last pov, thoughts of low self-worth

Xiao waited until his master's presence was well away before sitting up again. He was...very confused. Why would Master Morax have bothered searching for his kin, kin that Xiao himself didn't even remember, or think about? Much less personally take the time to tell him about it, instead of leaving him in ignorance or having the honorable one or Bosacius tell him.

Maybe he'd hoped to see the pain and grief on Xiao? If so, he hoped Master Morax wasn't too disappointed by his lack of reaction...disappointed gods could get...creative...he didn't want to think about that.

Most confusing of all was that...offer. Those like him did not have *homes*. They had places they were assigned, sometimes, to wait for orders or to be punished in, such as the incredibly generously appointed room he had been assigned here. But they did not have *homes*. A home implied...so many things, none of which slaves were allowed. Warmth. Safety. Autonomy. Possessions.

Once again, Xiao concluded that the people here *made no sense*. And it was beginning to be terrifying, because if he couldn't make sense of them, how could he anticipate their needs, prepare for orders so he could obey quickly and without mistakes?

His thoughts were interrupted as he felt Bosacius' presence rapidly approaching, and he couldn't help but flinch when he felt the fury wrapped up in electro. There was strong worry, too, but Bosacius was *furious* at someone, and angry electro was always bad, and...he reminded himself that Bosacius had never been mad at *him*, to his knowledge, that he wouldn't hurt him, and that even if he *did* it wouldn't matter because it would still be better than losing him, better than Bosacius dying or being hurt...

Then Bosacius was there, in the room, still moving fast, and before Xiao could do more than flinch again he was wrapped tightly in a four-armed hug - he stiffened, then made himself relax. It was only Bosacius, and if Bosacius was holding him like this, surely he wasn't angry at *Xiao*, right? He ruthlessly suppressed the memory of his nightmare. That wasn't real. The real Bosacius wouldn't react like that...probably...

"I'm so sorry I wasn't here for that, Morax is an *idiot*, how could he not realize you might not want to be alone for that news..."

He flinched *again*. How could Bosacius call his god names like that? Wasn't he afraid he'd be punished? And if he was getting mad at Master Morax on Xiao's behalf...his earlier worries about how the god would react to his valued marshal being turned against him by a mere *slave* resurfaced, and Xiao swallowed hard, trying to suppress his fear.

“Don’t say that. Please. Speaking against the gods never ends well, please...”

Bosacius stilled for a moment, then pulled away a little and lifted Xiao’s chin to meet his eyes.

“Little whirlwind, Morax is not the sort of god to punish someone for telling the truth about him. He *was* an idiot about this, and I told him as much in the corridor. I have called him idiot and worse to his face, when he has deserved it. He depends on us to keep him honest with himself, and to point out his mistakes.”

Xiao trembled, and shook his head. *It made no sense!* Nothing made any sense. Unless this was just some special privilege Bosacius had, as marshal...he supposed it might make sense for one valued for their military acumen to be permitted to argue, within reason.

“He wouldn’t punish anyone for calling him names in private for the fun of it, for that matter, though he might raise an eyebrow if he learned of it. Xiao, Morax *isn’t like your old master*. He won’t punish me, you, or anyone else for such harmless little things.”

He didn’t respond. He *couldn’t* respond. He was fairly sure that Bosacius either couldn’t understand that things were different for a privileged and valued member of Master Morax’s court than they were for such as he, or that he wouldn’t believe him. And he really, really didn’t want to argue with him right now.

Bosacius sighed, and Xiao’s heart twisted. He didn’t like making the yaksha upset, or worrying him. Maybe...maybe he could try to pretend to believe him...but he was pretty sure Bosacius preferred to know how he was *actually* feeling.

Another thing that made no sense. But he’d said he’d accept it, even if he couldn’t understand, so...

His head hurt.

“That’s not really what’s important right now...I won’t push you on it. Little whirlwind, are you alright? I know he just gave you some bad news...and knowing Morax, while he probably tried to deliver it gently, he was probably far too blunt...”

Bad news? He supposed it could be seen that way...but Master Morax had been...more than kind, if confusing. He hadn’t been punished for his ignorance, and Master Morax had expressed concern - for all it was surely false, why would a *god* be concerned for his feelings - and had made that...offer...that he was still sure he must’ve misunderstood somehow.

“Master Morax was very kind. This one is fine.”

Bosacius was giving him a very odd look.

“It is alright to grieve, little whirlwind.”

”...grieve?”

“He...he *did* tell you about your kin, right?”

This was very confusing.

“That they are dead, yes.”

Oh. Bosacius must believe he had some attachment to them.

“I don’t remember them. I’m not sure I knew them. Why would I grieve?”

Why was Bosacius *crying* now? He hesitated for a moment, then leaned forward and hugged the yaksha. It made *him* feel better sometimes, when Bosacius hugged *him*, so maybe...it seemed to be the right thing to do, as the yaksha's arms tightened around him for a long moment.

He wondered what had Bosacius so upset. Had he said something wrong?

Should he ask?

He knew normally he shouldn't ask questions that weren't necessary to complete his duties. Even *then*, he would often be punished for asking, if it was deemed a question he should already know the answer to, or importunate, or if the person he asked was in a bad mood.

But...this was *Bosacius*. And he was clearly hurting, though he had no wounds. And...Xiao *didn't want him hurt*.

So he asked.

"Why are you crying? Is...is it something I can fix?"

Bosacius stilled for a moment, then started stroking Xiao's hair. He couldn't help but shift a bit. It felt...good...comforting...but he wasn't answering. Maybe he shouldn't have...

"I'm sorry. I should not have asked."

The yaksha jumped a little, as though startled.

"No, no, you're fine. I'm just...I'm not sure how to explain in a way you'll understand."

He was quiet for awhile longer.

"I'm sad because your family is gone, and you don't seem to even remember what it's like to have them. Because you have been alone for so long that...that you don't even seem to know what you're missing, or how to recognize it when someone wants to befriend you. Because you have no one to return to...you said you don't remember your kin...You don't have to answer if you don't want to, little whirlwind, or if it hurts to think about, but...do you remember *anything* before that bastard got his hands on you?"

Xiao swallowed. It... *did* hurt to remember, but he'd remembered recently anyway, and so that day was still fresh in his mind. If...if Bosacius didn't ask for too many details, he thought he could keep it from showing. He didn't understand why it was important, though.

"No. Just that day, nothing before."

He felt a shudder go through Bosacius, and tried to hug him tighter. It was difficult with them both kneeling, he couldn't pull on his own hands to do so, the yaksha's chest was too big...

"Do you...do you know how old you were?"

That was an odd question. What did it matter? He tried to think. He didn't know his actual age, then or now, but...he'd been small, very small. He remembered having to struggle with everything being too big and heavy, and...

"Not exactly...but...I was still very clumsy, walking. Running was easier, but I still fell a lot. Does...knowing that help, somehow?"

Once again, Bosacius was silent for a long moment, and when he spoke, his voice was oddly thick.

“In some ways. I understand why you have been so confused better now, even more than...than I had expected you to be. I am so, so sorry you went through all this, little whirlwind, and that you have no memory of better.”

Xiao frowned. More things that didn't make sense. Why did no one and nothing here *ever make sense!*

“Why are you sorry? I...it doesn't make sense. I deserved what I got. Why are you sorry?”

Bosacius sighed and mostly let go, leaning back, and Xiao let go as he did so, finding that he was getting a little angry. Not at Bosacius, at...at *everything*. He was more confused than he'd started, and his head hurt, and he was tired of nothing making any *sense*... the yaksha swiped the tears from his face and stood, offering a hand to Xiao to help him up, and it *annoyed* him. He wasn't weak, or helpless, or hurt to need help merely to *stand*. He proved it, standing on his own easily, and staring down to avoid glaring.

Bosacius didn't deserve being glared at. Xiao was the one who was trash, dirt beneath his betters' feet. Bosacius had only been trying to help, had only failed to understand that he didn't *need* help.

He didn't understand why he was feeling this way. But then, he hadn't understood anything else today either, so that shouldn't be a surprise. Maybe his brain was simply broken.

“Well, the morning's been a bit more stressful than I intended, so why don't we go have lunch and relax a bit? Then we can talk over whether you're ready to accompany me to meet the other kids. You did very well at the meeting, by the way.”

That...didn't answer his question. That was fine, he didn't really deserve an answer, he *knew* that, but Bosacius was good at explaining things, mostly, and he was so *tired* of being confused.

And why did he insist on *walking* everywhere?! He *knew* Bosacius could teleport, and it was *faster*, and didn't leave all this extra time when his head was entirely too clear and he was forced to *think* about all the ways this place was so damn *confusing*...

Wait. Lunch? Wasn't that a...human thing, since they needed so much food?

“Why are we having lunch?”

Bosacius glanced down at him, and smiled.

“Because I still need extra nutrition after all the power I expended in battle, and you still need all the nutrition we can get into you.”

“Meaning the *broth*?”

“For now, yes. Give it another couple days, and if you can get down three mugs a day, Madame Ping might let you experiment with something that might taste better, okay?”

He frowned. He didn't think that would help. It *did* taste disgusting, but...it also made him feel sick. He had yet to notice feeling *better* from drinking it, as they kept insisting he would. And...he still kept expecting to get in trouble for it...the only 'nutrition' he'd ever been allowed before he came here was dreams...Xiao knew how useless it was to argue, though, and it made Bosacius so happy when he drank the stuff.

“I'll try...”

That got him a grin and a half-hug from the closest arms, but he just sighed. He felt very tired, suddenly.

Soon enough, they reached the kitchen, which was fortunately unoccupied. Bosacius immediately set about getting together some things on the counter, and Xiao watched carefully. They still hadn't given him any duties, but if he learned more useful things....they all seemed *obsessed* with food, perhaps if he learned to prepare it for them, however disgusting *he* found it, it would give him more value.

It didn't seem all that difficult, from what he could see. First the yaksha pulled out a large, oddly shaped metal dish from a drawer that let cold air into the room, then he set it on a bit of the counter that had metal bits protruding from it. He did something Xiao couldn't see, and suddenly there was a small flame under the metal dish, and Bosacius turned away from it to pull some things out of the cupboards. He then sliced the things from the cupboards - releasing a particularly revolting smell from the reddish object, like burned flesh - before stacking them on a plate and putting everything but the plate, its contents, and the metal dish away again.

After awhile, Bosacius did the thing he couldn't see at the counter again, and the flame disappeared. He got a mug out of another cupboard, and poured the hated broth into it from the metal dish.

He should've known.

Still, once he figured out what it was he did in front of the weird bit of counter to produce that flame, it seemed pretty simple. Maybe he could see if Bosacius would let him make a meal for him -

His thoughts were interrupted as Bosacius gave him the mug and gestured for him to sit.

Right.

He still had to drink the stuff.

Xiao glared at the mug, then gulped it down as quickly as he could to get it over with. It didn't really help...but once it was done...if he could distract himself from the roiling in his gut...maybe if he could get Bosacius talking. But about what? Oh. Homes. Maybe he could explain that.

"Bosacius, how would you define a 'home'?"

As the yaksha choked on a bite of his...thing, Xiao wondered if maybe he could have timed that better.

Instead of answering immediately, Bosacius got two cups from a cupboard and filled them from the pump in the sink. Xiao gratefully drank the one that was passed to him, glad for something to wash away the taste of the broth, and waited. He wondered if he'd get an answer to *this* question...but he didn't have to wait too long. Bosacius took only a couple of sips before he spoke.

"That is a complicated question to answer, and you would probably get different answers from different people. In general, a home is a place of safety and warmth, of belonging and control, your own little piece of territory, as it were. A place one might share with loved ones, and store their belongings. A place to return to and rest, when the day's labors are done."

So, they *did* mean the same thing here. But then...he didn't understand...Xiao's head throbbed again, and he wanted to cry, but he wouldn't, he *couldn't*, no matter what they kept saying he was *sure* crying was bad...

“Why do you ask, little whirlwind?”

Suddenly he found himself wishing Bosacius wouldn't call him *little* whirlwind. He didn't know why. He *was* small compared to the huge yaksha, and he liked the...fondness...it implied, the implication that he was like the little whirlwind in the stories. But right now it irritated him and he didn't know *why* and why couldn't he at least make sense of *himself*?

“Xiao?”

Oh, right. Bosacius had asked him a question, too.

“Master...Master offered me a home here. I don't understand.”

“What don't you understand?”

He grimaced and stared at the cup still in his hands. Maybe he shouldn't have asked Bosacius. This was probably one of those things he didn't see...but he still hadn't figured the right person *to* ask about those things pertaining to his place and duties...and he at least knew Bosacius wouldn't get mad at him for it.

“Those like me don't deserve or need...homes. It's...convenient...to know where to await orders, to have a set place to go when I am to be...punished, but not necessary, and that's not a...home. Why would Master offer such a thing, to one like me? Is...is it a trick, to see if I'll forget my place?”

He'd tried to keep his voice steady, but it wasn't working very well. He knew the floor was going to fall out beneath him at some point, that the façade would drop to show the truth of this place sometime, and he just wanted to know *when* so he could brace himself, but he was pretty sure Bosacius was somehow unaware that it *was* a façade and his stomach dropped as he realized that this might be another thing in the category of ‘things that could get him in trouble for putting a wedge between Master and his marshal’ and maybe it was better to just not understand after all, not to try, just to exist and obey and take whatever came the way he used to...

“Little whirlwind...no, it's not a trick, if Morax said that I guarantee he meant it, and I'm not surprised he offered, only that he did so soon. Everyone deserves a home, and the idea was probably in his mind from the moment he realized what had happened to your family.”

Of course he didn't understand. Xiao shouldn't have asked. He pulled his legs up onto the chair and held them, wishing he could go hide in his wings behind the bush again. But they were probably leaving soon...and as much as he really wanted to be left alone, he knew that was not a luxury he could expect, and he didn't want to risk leaving Bosacius unprotected anyway.

To his dismay, the yaksha got down on his knees next to Xiao's chair and tried to meet his eyes.

“Xiao, why do you think you don't deserve a home?”

Wasn't it obvious? He was a possession, not one who possessed things. He'd be lucky not to be thrown away, the way they kept refusing to let him do anything. But he already knew Bosacius wouldn't, *couldn't* understand that.

It was safer not to answer.

“Could...could we go over what's happening this afternoon again?”

There was silence for a long moment, then the yaksha sighed.

“I’ve been helping six kids other than you, all mortal. We’ll be meeting with them by a pond near the town, but far enough away you shouldn’t have to deal with anyone else new, probably. Don’t be worried if they run at me or jump on me, that’s a fairly standard greeting for some of them when they haven’t seen me in awhile. You don’t have to interact with them today if you don’t want to, just say as much if they approach and they’ll leave you alone. Things like this are mostly a chance to catch up with each other, make sure everyone’s doing alright, and have some fun with everyone.”

Xiao nodded, and Bosacius sighed and ruffled his hair.

“If you aren’t up to it after this morning, I understand. You could stay here while I - “

“No!”

His head snapped up in alarm. No, not that far away, all alone but for some humans and with his guard down! He could hold it together. He *could*.

“I’ll come. I’m...I’m fine, I can handle it!”

”...alright. I’ll finish eating this on the way then, if you’re ready?”

Xiao nodded, and Bosacius scooped up his food in one hand before leading him to the subspace entrance.

He hesitated.

Was this really okay?

He wouldn’t get in trouble for this, would he?

Bosacius seemed to read his mind, and spoke up gently.

“It’s alright. I checked with Morax, and even if I hadn’t, I’m one of his representatives, remember? You can leave the subspace as long as you stay with me. You aren’t breaking your contract.”

He took a deep breath and nodded. He could do this. He had to, he couldn’t risk...he swallowed hard, remembering how it had felt to think Bosacius was dead. He could do this.

He stepped through the pass-through, feeling the energies wash over him, and Bosacius took his hand.

“I’m going to teleport us directly there this time, so you don’t need to worry about running into anyone on the way, okay? And if you get scared and need to run, you can teleport directly here and immediately go back into the subspace, and you won’t be in violation of your contract.”

Xiao nodded. He had no objection to Bosacius teleporting him, but he had no intention of running back alone. He would not *abandon* another mighty one. The yaksha put an arm around him, and he couldn’t help but flinch as he was briefly surrounded by the sense of *electro*, and then they were next to a pond and what looked like a whole *horde* of human children were charging at them and shrieking and surely that was more than *six*...

He stumbled back several paces then stopped as Bosacius walked forward instead. He couldn’t get too far away from him - what if they weren’t the ones they were here to meet - but the yaksha was relaxed and grinning and opening all four arms wide, and after a moment Xiao realized that the shrieks were shouts of the man’s name.

“*Saish!*”

“Bosacius is here!”

“Saish, where *were* you?”

“Are you okay? Are we all safe? We’re not under attack, are we?”

“Saish!”

As Bosacius had predicted, some of them promptly jumped on and climbed on him, and he spun around a couple of times laughing, with them clinging to his arms, before he swung them back down.

“Alright, alright, settle down for a moment, okay? I have stuff to tell you guys, and someone to introduce.”

The children promptly quieted as Xiao started to worry. Bosacius had said he didn’t have to interact with them, why was he introducing him to them...

“First off, yes Biubei, everyone’s safe. There was an attack, but it was easily dealt with, and didn’t come remotely close to endangering anyone inside Morax’s lands. The god responsible will likely attack again, but has been determined unlikely to be a real threat. I *promise*, if a real threat comes against us, they will make sure everyone knows and is prepared.”

A little girl with short hair gave a sigh of relief, and the boy next to her nudged her shoulder.

“See Bei, I told you! You don’t need to worry so much now that you’re here.”

“Jian, be nice. You all have things you worry about that others don’t.”

The boy looked chastened at Bosacius’ words.

“Sorry, Biubei. I didn’t mean to make fun of you, I just didn’t want you to worry...”

She whispered something too quiet for Xiao to hear, and the two hugged. He started to relax a little. The longer he was here, the more he was reminded how little threat humans were. Bosacius should be safe...these mortals hardly had enough presence to even *sense*, much less enough to indicate enough strength to overpower an adeptus.

“Now, the reason I was gone so long was because there’s a new kid I’ve been helping. He’s been through a lot, like you guys - you know what it’s like at first, so be gentle, okay? We only brought him here a little over a week ago. Don’t push him too hard, he might not be ready to have fun with you guys yet.”

Bosacius waved for Xiao to come forward, and after a moment’s hesitation, he moved to stand next to the yaksha.

“Everyone, this is Xiao. Xiao, these are the other kids I’m currently helping out, Jian, Biubei, Adaru, Meiling, Shian, and Delbor.”

Each of them nodded as Bosacius said their name, and Xiao tried to remember which one was which, but he was having trouble...names usually weren’t important, and everything was too bright, and too loud even though they weren’t shrieking anymore, and despite his determination earlier he *was* having trouble holding it together.

He reminded himself that they were just mortals, no threat to himself or Bosacius, but it didn't help. There were too many and he couldn't predict them and...he swallowed hard, and realized Bosacius was talking to him.

"...watch from that tree over there?"

He looked where Bosacius was pointing, and saw a large tree overshading the pond from a small rise. It would have a good view of everything, but was far enough away from where the kids - once again seeming like far more than *six* - were now racing around that he wouldn't feel so crowded.

Xiao nodded, and promptly teleported over to sit against the trunk and keep watch.

It was...easier, with a little distance. He could see what they were doing, track trajectories, predict movements a little easier.

After a few minutes, they all stopped running around as Bosacius called them over to what appeared to be a large boulder. To Xiao's surprise, the yaksha...shoved the top of the boulder off? It split cleanly, and then the mortals were hauling a variety of strange objects out from *inside* the boulder...ahh. It must be some sort of disguised storage space.

Two of the children, Jian and - the older girl, not Biubei, had he forgotten her name already? - retrieved a large, round object from the boulder and set off in his general direction while the others clustered around some smaller objects as Bosacius directed them in some activity.

At first, he thought the two were just looking for a more open space for...whatever they were doing. Unfortunately, it quickly became clear they were coming towards him deliberately. Xiao swallowed and stood, once again trying to remind himself they weren't a threat. Bosacius had *said* some of them might offer to interact, and that he could turn them down. He just had to listen, and say he didn't want to. That was all. He'd be fine.

Despite the tree's shade, everything still seemed too bright. He squinted a little, trying to see more clearly as they approached. He...wasn't sure what to make of their expressions. They stopped when they got...closer than he'd like, really. Xiao shifted his feet. Was the soil here unstable? He could swear it shifted...

"It's Xiao, right?"

Cautiously, he nodded. The two mortals grinned at each other.

"Would you like to come play with us?"

Xiao froze as the world seemed to come to a standstill briefly before everything started moving too fast, swirling around him, the words echoing in his head.

*'No, no, it's supposed to be different here, I thought it was **different**, why do I keep falling for it over and over again, I'm always wrong, it's always the same...'*

He violently shook his head, then froze again as something big and rough hit his back. There was an odd wailing in his ears, and the smell of burning feathers, and it *hurt*, it *hurt so much*, and the wind was swirling around him and why was there wind indoors and please no he didn't want anyone to play with him *please*...

He froze in shock. There was...there was no mistaking that face... *Alatus* , the *demon*, was standing on the rise, glaring at two children as he raised his power...the man dropped the boar carcass he was carrying, turning and running as fast as he could, praying not to be noticed. He had to warn the town, tell the yaksha, tell *someone* the danger that had somehow made its way *here* , to the very heart of Morax's lands, where they were supposed to be *safe*...

He sobbed as he ran, memories rising unbidden of his dead-eyed son and daughter, barely breathing where they lay too still in their beds, his wife dying with her guts strewn across their kitchen...he'd been a coward then, too. He'd hidden until the demon was gone, then fled to Morax's lands, pled for sanctuary with the other survivors...and now he was *here*..

This time he at least could do some good with his running. He could warn them before it was too late - *there* - an adeptus, in armor, that meant she was a yaksha, right?

"Honorable yaksha! Please, a moment of your time, I have something to report, a danger's made its way past the borders - "

She turned to him, her eyes narrowing as she focused on his words.

"What danger?"

"The demon Alatus! I saw him, ready to strike down two children! He's here!"

She stiffened and seemed to consider him through even narrower eyes for a moment.

"I know."

His jaw dropped in shock. She *knew*? And did nothing?!

"So does our lord. Come with me, and tell me what you saw."

Discussions

Chapter Notes

TW this chapter: outside view of a panic attack, thoughts of very low self worth, eating issues

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

”...so, see, if you place your stone *here*, you’ll capture all of Adaru’s stones and be several points ahead. Anywhere else, and he has the chance to - “

Bosacius’ explanation was cut short as a despairing wail cut through the air, and he was on his feet and moving before he’d even consciously registered the direction. Jian met him halfway to the tree, crying but apparently unhurt.

“I don’t know what we did wrong, we were careful, I promise, we just asked if he wanted to play with us, we didn’t touch him - “

“You did fine. I’ll take care of it from here, you go wait with the others.”

He barely even registered Jian’s acknowledgement as he ran the rest of the way. Meiling was standing outside the range of Xiao’s winds, trying to call reassurances to him in as calm a voice she could manage at that volume - he’d have to thank her later, she was doing the exact right thing, given the information she had. He sent her back, too, then knelt down at the edge of the winds himself.

The anemo-fueled wind wasn’t so strong that he couldn’t push through it, probably, but it was a strong signal to stay away. So for now, he’d do much like Meiling had been doing - except he had a better idea which words might help, and his deeper voice might do a better job of carrying past the high whine of the wind.

“You’re safe, Xiao. You’re in Morax’s lands, and Moharus is dead. He can’t hurt you anymore. No one here will intentionally hurt you. No one will touch you until you are ready. You’re *safe*, little whirlwind.”

Bosacius repeated variations on the same words, over and over, and eventually the wailing stopped, and the winds began to die down, slowly. The kid was still plastered with his back against the tree as if something was holding him there, and he could see Xiao’s lips moving, but he couldn’t make out what he was saying...he kept up his own words, adjusting his volume as the wind quieted.

Finally, after a long while, the anemo fueling the wind died away entirely. Xiao slid down the tree trunk - the yaksha winced, sandbearer bark was far from smooth - and sat holding his legs, burying his face in his knees. After a moment’s hesitation, Bosacius moved closer, but knelt again still a few feet away. It was probably best not to crowd the kid. Clearly this trigger was a bad one, whatever it was.

“You’re safe. Whatever it is that you think is happening, or are afraid is about to, is not and will not. I’m here. You can come to me when you’re ready, if you want. You’re safe. Moharus is dead,

and can't hurt you anymore. I won't hurt you."

He was hardly even keeping track of what he was saying at this point, focused on his little whirlwind, the way his shoulders slowly eased their shaking. Whatever he'd been saying while the winds were high, he seemed to have stopped, just sitting there in a tight ball.

Bosacius' words were starting to get a little raspy when Xiao finally unfolded a little, looking around slowly as if trying to sort out where he was.

"Xiao? Are you back with me, now?"

Xiao nodded, and the yaksha opened his arms wide. To his relief, his little whirlwind immediately ran over and tucked himself against his side in a trembling ball. Okay, less relieved that he was clearly still afraid...but at least he was willing to accept comfort. That was a start.

Once again he waited, simply holding him and occasionally giving him those little head-skratches he'd liked so much before, giving the kid a chance to calm down more before he spoke again.

"Do you know what the trigger was?"

After a long moment, Bosacius felt a nod against his side.

"Can you tell me what it is, so we can avoid it? Or do you need more time to calm down first?"

A shudder went through the bony ball at his side, then Xiao uncurled a little.

"C-can this one ask a question first?"

"Of course."

There was a long moment as Xiao apparently worked up the courage.

"W-what does p-p-play m-mean here?"

Bosacius' heart stopped.

Please, no. From what they *already* knew, the boy's life had been a horror, but... *'Please, Celestia, let him have been spared this at least...Stars, not this...'*

He swallowed hard. He...should not make assumptions. It might mean something different. It might.

Regardless, he found himself wishing there was a way to hurt that bastard from beyond the grave.

"Here, it means to have fun, usually with others, pl- using games and toys for mutual enjoyment. Such as tossing a ball back and forth or competing in a sport. No one is hurt, generally, though accidents can happen, as with any activity."

He swallowed again.

"What...are you used to it meaning? You...don't have to answer...but it might help me understand, and avoid situations that might be a problem for you."

Another shudder went through that too-small form, and Bosacius hugged him a little closer.

"Burning, and b-broken b-bones, and *pain*... M-master M-moharus I-liked to p-play with my w-w-

wings....y-you saw..."

"Oh, little whirlwind..."

Bosacius pulled Xiao more fully into his lap to hug him properly, alert for signs it was unwanted, for all he desperately wanted to hold the kid close and *safe*. But Xiao remained limp, so the yaksha arranged him as comfortably as he could and wrapped all four arms around him, resting his chin on the boy's head and rocking a little. He couldn't stop the tears anymore. It wasn't what he'd been afraid of, but it was still...no wonder he'd panicked, when asked if he wanted to play.

"I'm so sorry you went through all that. You didn't deserve it. I promise that's not what's meant by the word here, but we'll try to avoid the word anyway, alright? At least until you're ready for it. I'm sorry, I hoped this would be a chance for you to have some fun..."

"Xiao?"

He looked up to see Jian and Meiling standing a little distance away, and beyond them the other four, watching Xiao with concern. Of course...they were good kids, and they all knew what a panic attack was like. He glanced down, and was glad to see the little whirlwind had looked up, without any sign of getting further upset. Jian and Meiling looked at each other, and the girl nodded to her friend. Jian stepped forward a little more.

"We're sorry. We didn't mean to scare you. I...we...know it might be too much for you right now, but we hope you'll come back again later, and...have some fun with us."

So, they'd been paying enough attention to catch the trouble word? Good kids. He'd still need to explain a bit further, probably, but it helped. Xiao didn't tense up, so Bosacius just waited to see how he'd respond.

"I-it's alright. You didn't do anything wrong, it is this one's weakness...d-did this one h-hurt any of you?"

It was Meiling who stepped forward this time, shaking her head.

"Nope! We're all fine. It was obvious you weren't trying to hurt anyone, that you just wanted everyone to be *away*. We know what that's like."

"Th-then, this one would be honored to come again, if it would be permitted."

His little whirlwind looked up at him, and Bosacius smiled and nodded.

"I'm sure it can be arranged."

The other kids lit up and cheered - Xiao flinched a little, but that was all - before racing back down to the pond to put away their toys and games properly.

Goodbyes went much more smoothly than the rest of the afternoon had, and after closing the disguised rock Morax had helped him make for the kid's toys, he once again took Xiao's hand and teleported them both back to the entrance to Madame Ping's. It was getting late, but not late enough for bed, really - except that it was plain the little whirlwind still needed extra rest, whether he was aware of it or not. The original plans for the evening were moot, anyway. Given the associations of Xiao's panic earlier, this was definitely not the best time for Madame Ping to start evaluating and working on the kid's older wounds, especially on his wings.

Tomorrow, maybe.

For now, he led Xiao towards the kitchen, figuring to see if he could get one more mug of broth into him tonight. He'd have the same thing for dinner out of solidarity...he didn't really need more food himself, just yet, but it was hard enough to get nutrients into the little whirlwind without him being the only one. And maybe if he tried it, he could get the kid to open up about how it might be improved to be more drinkable.

As the kid remained utterly silent while he got their mugs ready, though, he began to hope he could get him to open up about *anything*. The yaksha didn't want to push, but...it felt like they were running into new triggers and stumbling blocks constantly, and if he had *some* warning on what to expect, maybe he could spare Xiao some unnecessary pain. He'd been through more than enough pain, already, and honestly Bosacius was starting to wonder how the kid had kept his mind as intact as he had.

He had just taken his first sip of the broth - okay, not the best, granted, but certainly not so terrible as Xiao made it out to be - when the little whirlwind let off glaring at his own to ask him a question. Bosacius immediately clamped his fingers on his nose and prayed broth wouldn't run out when he let go. Really, the kid had such a sense of *timing*.

“What does ‘fun’ mean?”

Ah...he'd apparently picked the wrong time for a question again. Xiao grimaced down at the mug he'd been handed. He still wasn't sure why Bosacius wasn't mad at him for losing control like that, except that, well, it was *Bosacius*. He wasn't sure how long he had before anyone else found out. Master Morax, at least, would undoubtedly be displeased with him losing control around the mortals he wasn't supposed to harm.

He didn't want to think how bad that would be, so he might as well distract himself with trying to make sense of some of the day. He hadn't meant to mess up Bosacius' meal again...

“I apologize...”

The yaksha immediately shook his head, which looked a little odd with his fingers still attached to his nose.

“No, you're fine. So...about half of what I said earlier made no real sense to you, huh? Without knowing what fun means...”

Bosacius sighed, then slowly released his nose, looking oddly relieved for some reason afterwards.

Maybe he was just insane? It would certainly explain why he had so many odd reactions...though it wasn't a terribly reassuring thought for *him*.

No, probably not, odd though the yaksha's reactions were, they were still *consistent*. If he'd lost his mind, they wouldn't be. Probably.

“Do you at least know what it means to *enjoy* something?”

“Of course.”

Granted, mostly in the negative, but there had been times when he’d had a moment to feel the breeze on his cheek, or to look at the stars, and more recently the bath, especially the ‘soaking pool’...

“Fun is...actively enjoying something, generally an activity. If you enjoy running for the sake of it, that would be fun for you. I enjoy telling stories, so for me telling stories is fun. Doing an activity you enjoy with someone else who also enjoys it, is having fun *with* them. Does this make sense?”

He nodded. Logically, at least it did define the word...though the implications certainly weren’t likely to apply to him, once this strange grace period for healing was over. It implied the time and choice to do what one wanted...and that was not something Xiao had ever had, or expected to.

Yet, those mortal children had invited him to return...to ‘have fun’ with them...

Perhaps they too, were unaware of certain realities, like Bosacius. But...they were human, and that seemed unlikely. Only the mortals had been lower than he, in Master Moharus’ domain, if not all of them...surely they, at least, would know? Ah. There had been multiple signs that children were considered differently from adults, here. Maybe they were shielded from such knowledge until they grew? But how?

...Master Morax’s ‘contract’ had very specifically forbidden the harm of humans, for any reason. Maybe they ranked above adepti, here?

It was all very confusing.

He realized that Bosacius was eying him oddly again. It kind of reminded him of the way his face felt when he wanted to ask something but didn’t dare...but why would *he* be afraid to ask something? The yaksha had status, and Master Morax’s favor, and was strong, if oblivious to some dangers. So why would *he* be afraid of *anything*?

“Is there anything else you didn’t understand today, that you’d like me to explain?”

“No.”

Yes, there was, a great deal, but he didn’t think Bosacius could help him with most of it. He’d have to either ask Master Morax, or wait and find out the hard way, probably...and right now, he suspected it would be much, much safer to try to remain beneath his master’s notice.

Don’t think about that right now.

Don’t think about what penalties might be exacted for putting humans in danger.

Searching for another distraction, he realized he hadn’t drunk the broth yet. It had been made fairly clear that it was a required thing to do...one of the few things that *was* clear.

He drank it.

It was as nasty as ever.

It still upset his stomach.

He must have made a face, because Bosacius chuckled and brought him a cup of water.

“I admit it’s not the best broth I’ve ever had, but it doesn’t taste all that bad to me. Is there anything

particular about it you don't like?"

Xiao drank the water, rinsing the flavor from his mouth as he tried to figure out how to answer. He'd told them, over and over, that he didn't need food, but they didn't believe him.

Maybe if he tried to explain more thoroughly?

"I've told you before. I don't need mortal food. Until I came here, the only sustenance this one had was...dreams, which I *hate* to eat but they fed me and Master required it but Master Morax has forbidden it and that's *good* but..."

He was rambling. Xiao took a deep breath.

"Mortal food...even this broth...makes this one feel sick, and tastes horrible. This one is required to consume it, and will obey, but I don't think there's any way to make it *better*. It is fine. I will obey."

He *would*. Feeling sick and a momentary bad taste were really very minor things, compared to what he was used to. If that was all that was being asked of him, he should be grateful, and he *was*.

Still. It didn't seem like something that would...be of use, to Master Morax in any way. And until he found out what he was to be used for, it was hard not to worry. He'd already reached the point *he* would consider 'healed', and then some. What, exactly, was their goal? When would this easier time end? And what would be required of him, after? It was very clear that the terms of the 'contract' only lasted until he was 'healed', whatever they meant by that. He had no guarantee that he would not be ordered to do the same things he'd been forced to by Master Moharus after that point. At least...he didn't think it was likely he'd be used to enforce Master Morax's will on his own people. Everyone here seemed too at ease for that to be a regular thing.

His musings were interrupted as Bosacius finally spoke.

"If you have no real experience with food...then we will have to experiment. But you are an adeptus, little whirlwind. You have a physical form, and it needs physical sustenance. I...should not be surprised that after so long without, your body is not certain how to handle it anymore. That's why we started with the broth, after all. But give it time. Eventually, you'll be able to see the improvement it makes, I'm sure."

He waited, but Xiao didn't answer. What was there to say? Bosacius didn't believe him. That was no surprise. It seemed hard for him to believe a great many facts of Xiao's existence.

Xiao tried not to resent that. Bosacius already gave him...so much more than he had any right to expect. So much more than he deserved, with the kindness and guidance and the way the yaksha put up with all his flaws in good humor. With stories and companionship and hugs and so, so much *patience*. What was this, next to all that? He should be grateful, and he *was*, but he also selfishly wanted *more*.

They really had been too kind to him here, if he was slipping that much. Such as he should know better than to *want*.

There was another sigh from Bosacius' direction, and he suppressed the urge to cringe, reminding himself that the yaksha never seemed to get mad at him. No matter how disappointing he was. It was rather odd, really.

"It's been a long, stressful day for both of us. Why don't we head to bed?"

Xiao nodded. He had no need for rest, but if Bosacius was tired, he was hardly going to keep him up.

It wasn't until they reached his designated room that he realized there was a problem. As soon as he set about preparing to lie down and pretend to sleep, he started shaking. His body refused to comply, and images teased the back of his mind.

He couldn't do it.

He hadn't suppressed the memories of being played with hard enough.

Xiao ruthlessly shoved the memories further back, straining against his own muscles, *trying* to force himself forward. It was only for a few minutes. Bosacius would be asleep in no time, and then he could sit back up. *It was just for a few minutes.*

He couldn't do it.

He shook harder, to his humiliation, and he could feel the memories boiling, threatening to flood his mind again despite his best efforts...

A hand touched his shoulder and he jumped, then whirled around, heart pounding.

It was just Bosacius, face filled once more with concern he didn't deserve.

"Is it lying down that's the problem?"

How did he know?! Xiao hurriedly nodded, and realized his face was wet as the motion drew air across his cheeks. He quickly scrubbed it away.

Before he could protest that it was fine, that Bosacius should sleep, that he'd manage eventually - the yaksha had simply reached over and piled his blankets and pillows into a new shape.

"There. It won't be quite as comfortable, but now you can sleep sitting up."

Xiao blinked at the impromptu pile. It did look comfortable. And if it would suit well enough to convince Bosacius of his pretense...it would certainly be easier than forcing his mind and body to cooperate with a more normal position. He nodded and crawled over, pulling a blanket around himself and leaning against the pile.

That seemed to be enough to satisfy the yaksha, who flopped on his own bed, which creaked loudly at the sudden weight. He hesitated, looking like he was going to say something, then shook his head and sighed again.

"Good night, little whirlwind."

"Good night."

Once again, Xiao waited for snores to indicate Bosacius was asleep, then sat up more properly to wait the night out. It was very boring, sitting here with nothing to do but wait with his thoughts, watching for possible threats - for all they seemed unlikely in this subspace. Still, there were far worse things than mere boredom.

One of those worse things came a couple hours later. A tempting, too-sweet scent filled the air, and Xiao determinedly closed his eyes, refusing to look at the glow he knew would be waiting on the other side of the room. A glow he knew he could touch, pull apart and eat. That would fill his

stomach in a way his body knew how to handle, that would make him feel so good - and that would tear at him with bitterness and guilt.

No.

He was *not* going to eat Bosacius' dreams.

Or anyone else's, for that matter.

It was forbidden.

Even if it weren't, he didn't want to.

He *didn't*.

His stomach twisted with *want*, and Xiao tried to ignore it, summoning his wings around himself as though they could keep the scent of dreams away. He felt fresh tears on his cheeks as he rested his head on his knees, clenching his jaw and resisting with everything he had.

It was worse than last night.

He really must be a monster, to want so badly to destroy one who'd shown him such kindness...

Xiao curled up tighter, and waited, hoping desperately for morning to come quickly.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if this chapter seemed...less exciting, than usual. This chapter and the previous two were all originally supposed to be one chapter, before they grew out of hand XD

Guilt and Tea

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait!

TW's this chapter: guilt trips, medical details, description of old wounds, self hatred, addiction, temptation, let me know if I missed anything!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiao couldn't remember a night that had felt as long as this one. The shelter of his wings hadn't been enough, and eventually he'd fled to the furthest corner of the room from Bosacius, pressing back into the wall to keep his body from creeping forward. He kept squeezing his eyes shut, trying to block out that sweet, sweet glow, but they kept opening of their own accord and latching onto it. He'd ripped off a bit of his shirt and rammed the cloth up his nose, and that kept the smell down, but his mouth still watered as he tasted the scent on his tongue...

Eventually, finally, the glow faded, and Xiao tried not to sob with relief. He needed to keep quiet, if Bosacius woke up he'd know Xiao wasn't sleeping, and they'd argue, and he...he didn't want to argue. He didn't want to find the limits of Bosacius' patience with him, not really. Because if he found those limits Bosacius might decide to wash his hands of Xiao...he quietly slipped back onto the bed, now that it wasn't so risky. Hopefully it wasn't too long until dawn...boredom was better than the presence of dreams, but he'd decided over the last few hours that it was still highly unpleasant. With nothing else to do, he was left to think, and that was unlikely to lead anywhere useful right now.

He currently had no way to get the crucial information he needed to ensure his survival here. If Master Morax kept Bosacius and those like him in the dark about how he handled his slaves, and even about their existence, that left him with either waiting until he encountered another like himself, or asking Master Morax directly what was expected of him. And...questioning a god never went well. It was not his place to ask questions. He only got away with it with Bosacius because he was...different, and he knew it. So further endless wondering about what he should be doing wasn't helpful.

Neither was dwelling on the events of the afternoon. His reaction had been atrocious, and very nearly in breach of the contract rules, and he knew it. Punishment would come or it wouldn't, but as strange as things were here he didn't have the means to predict what to expect with that either.

The morning...might be worth pondering. he still wasn't sure why Master Morax had insisted on telling him about his kin at all, much less personally, and alone. And in such detail! Why did it matter that he came from a clan of healers? *He* certainly knew nothing about healing. As near as he could tell, from what had been said, the only traits he'd gotten from them that remained were the wings that were so often used against him, and the terrible ability to eat dreams.

But as he thought about it, he had a sinking feeling.

Those healers had been wiped out by *Master Moharus*.

Had it been because of *him*?

To keep them from coming after him, or in a fury at how useless he'd been? It was the sort of thing his old master would do...had it been a punishment for some early transgression he didn't even remember now?

The more he thought about it, the more the certainty that it had been his fault, one way or another, settled like stone in his gut. An *entire clan* of honorable healers, gone, because of him...how many lives could they have saved if Xiao had never been so easily, *foolishly* caught? If he'd never existed at all?

Was that number higher or lower than the number of innocent lives he'd destroyed personally, at Master Moharus' command?

Guilt swamped him, and he was so distracted by it that he didn't notice the glow and scent were back until he was already halfway to Bosacius' side.

'No no nonono!'

Panicking, Xiao leapt back to the corner, frantically shoving the bits of cloth back up his nostrils. He hadn't realized he could try to eat dreams without even being *aware* of it - what if it happened while he was *unconscious* sometime?! No, no, he hadn't reached for the glow yet, he'd just been heading towards it, Bosacius was safe, he hadn't hurt him, he would be fine, he *would*...

More tears streaked down his face, and try as he might he couldn't stop them. How many more dreams would Bosacius *have* tonight? How much more of this did he have to endure?

Xiao looked out the window, and prayed for dawn to come quickly.

Morax slammed the paper back down on the desk, following it immediately with his elbows as he gripped his head in frustration. He couldn't focus. He'd been staring at that paper for over an hour, and he still wasn't sure if it was a report, a request of some sort, a political notification, a letter...he wasn't sure he'd even read the salutation yet.

He wasn't sure he'd consciously *looked* at the paper yet.

Instead, he kept seeing the too-blank face of that young adeptus, the way he barely moved save to shake, show subservience, or obey his orders.

He kept hearing his marshal explain that Xiao didn't know he was free, maybe didn't know what freedom *was*, didn't understand *choice*, much less that he could've refused the contract.

He kept remembering the shock he'd felt echo in the child's presence at the offer of such a basic thing as a *home*.

How skeletally thin he was, even now that they'd been getting some nutrition into him.

How he hadn't reacted at all to learning his family was gone.

The *fear* that never seemed to leave Xiao's presence any time he was close enough to sense it...

Morax felt ill.

He was not a god that wanted to be feared and obeyed. He wanted to protect, to ensure his people had the safety and security to grow and prosper. He loved contracts because they kept things fair...and hated unfair contracts, and the idea of forcing someone into one, with a passion. That he'd unwittingly done so himself was not something he'd be able to reconcile any time soon. He'd hoped the offer of a home here, of the perpetual safety and protection and *place* that implied, might make a start at making up for it, given what the boy had lost. Nevermind that it was nothing more than he'd offer any other refugee in his lands. *Less* than he'd offered many of his adepts, to encourage them to stay...

...maybe it wasn't a start at all.

He was fooling himself. This was a debt that would be long in repaying, and that he couldn't even start on until Xiao was ready. If he ever was...Bosacius had assured him, repeatedly, that the young adeptus was improving, was doing well, but then why did he continue to react the same way to Morax's presence?

Why did he terrify the child so? He didn't think it was his power; as Xiao recovered physically it was becoming quite clear he was powerful in his own right, well able to escape if he were minded to, now that the *vile* crystal structure inside him had been destroyed. Though Morax had to admit to himself that if the boy did so before their contract was complete, he would likely be forced to track him down and enforce it....he wished he could make amendments to the thing, if not abolish it entirely, given the circumstances, but Bosacius had already warned him how bad an idea that was.

He tried to think how Guizhong would approach this...probably by telling him to put himself in Xiao's place, to imagine how he'd feel in his position.

He tried.

He'd be furious at those who'd hurt him, delighted to be free....

No, that didn't match the young adeptus' reactions *at all*.

...he was terrible at this...

The dragon growled with frustration and threw his head back. This wasn't getting him anywhere. His friends had Xiao well in hand, from what he'd been told, and there was nothing he could do about that situation, at the moment. And he couldn't deal with the minutia of being a ruling figure - whether he liked to think of himself that way or not, he *was*, and it would be wrong to ignore the associated duties - when his mind kept spinning in circles of guilt and worry. If he could not solve the problem at this time, he needed to set it aside.

But his mind refused to do so. Willpower, clearly, was not sufficient to the task.

Perhaps if he cleared his mind entirely, afterwards he would be able to direct it more appropriately...

Morax neatly set the paper he'd been trying to read to one side, capped his ink, and set out to see if Azhdaha was interested in a sparring session. Tumbling about the landscape in his true form sounded like a good way to exorcise his thoughts...

Madame Ping took a deep breath and tried to calm herself, her hands running over her supplies as though to check for the dozenth time that she had everything. Several large sheets of paper, artists' chalk, multiple colors of ink for when the sketches were finalized. A tea mixture designed for calming and pain relief, that she hoped she could convince her patient to drink. It was all there. It *had* been all there for the last half hour.

All the delay in the world wouldn't help. She was certain this was the least risky method of evaluating the boy's condition, under the circumstances. It really asked very little of him, except perhaps some hours of boredom. And she *had* to get him properly evaluated...she'd caught enough in prior readings to know that bone ridges and muscular scarring had to be causing him a great deal of pain, and there were still half-healed wounds that had been too old to treat magically, that had to be watched to ensure *they* didn't add to the cumulative damage. And she needed a way to show the bird adepti where things stood, without forcing Xiao to interact with more new and powerful people. This method made sense.

There was no reason for what she planned for the afternoon to hurt him.

'There was no reason to think aiming a reading at that structure would hurt him, either...'

Shaking off the recent memories, the healer focused on her patient. It was better to reach him while he was still in the kitchen; Bosacius knew what was coming, and had hopefully told Xiao, but if they went to the boy's room to wait...she couldn't help but think that intruding on what little privacy the child had would hardly be helpful.

She quickly gathered up her supplies and headed out of her rooms. Madame Ping was relieved to find her delays hadn't taken too long, and the two were still there - but less relieved to see the way Xiao tensed up at her presence. She clearly still had a long way to go to earn his trust.

There weren't any mugs on the table, so presumably he'd already finished lunch. Perfect.

"Hello, Xiao. Are you ready for your evaluation?"

Xiao made an abortive motion, halted by the yaksha's quick hand on his shoulder, then swallowed and simply bowed his head instead of whatever he'd tried to do. Hopefully not prostrate himself...it was bad enough he insisted on doing that in front of Morax.

"Yes, honorable one."

"Then perhaps we should move to the dayroom? There is a small stove there for tea, and plenty of room for your wings."

The child flinched at the mere mention of his wings, and Madame Ping found herself very, very glad her plan didn't involve touching them.

"Yes, honorable one."

Anticipating that the child was likely to be uncomfortable with her behind him, Madame Ping led them down the halls, trying not to drop the rolls of paper. The silence was unnerving...she could

feel tension radiating from behind her, and wasn't sure if she hoped it was related to the evaluation or not. She hoped he wasn't too worried about what she'd do...but she didn't want him to have had any more disasters, either.

Once they reached the dayroom, Madame Ping went straight for the large table in the middle and set down her supplies before she dropped something. She had no idea how artists managed to haul all this and more to remote vistas to paint...they must court disaster every step of the way...

She was delaying again.

She hadn't been this nervous about a patient in centuries...

She hadn't messed up so badly and repeatedly with a patient in centuries, either.

Deep breaths.

She took the tin of tea mixture and turned around, to find Xiao kneeling on the floor - not prostrated, at least, she supposed - and Bosacius quietly trying to urge him to stand.

"There's no need for that, little one. I'm your healer, not your superior. Did Bosacius tell you what I have planned today?"

The boy hesitated for a long moment, then stood, though his eyes remained glued to the floor.

"Yes, honorable one. You intend to draw...what is inside this one...so you can develop a treatment plan."

"Yes. If you have any questions, feel free to ask them, I won't mind. I also made up some tea for you we can brew, that should help you remain calm and ease your pain."

The young adeptus started to shake. What was he thinking?

"Xiao? Is there something you want to ask before we start?"

"N-no, honorable one."

The healer looked to Bosacius, but he appeared just as confused and worried as she was. Well, she couldn't force the child to talk. Hopefully he'd find the courage to bring up whatever it was at some point - *before* whatever thoughts were in his head sent things sideways.

She was really, very sure, absolutely certain, that nothing she had planned would hurt him, physically. She was just doing readings, lots of them. That damned structure was gone, his adeptal energy was at very high levels and still seemed to be increasing, there was *no way* a reading could hurt him.

Logically speaking.

Her head throbbed, and she wondered if maybe *she* shouldn't have a mug of that tea when it was ready...

Madame Ping handed over the tin to Bosacius, and gestured for Xiao to take a seat. He did, if hesitantly. Still, a sign of progress, perhaps. She'd take what she could get. A moment to arrange the first sheet and chalks while Bosacius started on the tea, and then she couldn't put things off any longer.

"Alright, child. All I need you to do right now is let me hold your hands for a few minutes. You

shouldn't feel a thing other than my hands on yours, so please tell me if you do."

A hesitant nod, and he held out his shaking hands for her to take.

That first reading was almost anticlimactic. Everything went smoothly - the swirling energy she remembered was back to flowing as it should, without that structure mucking up his system - and she was able to get a nice, clear look at the state of his body.

As she'd feared, things were worse than she'd been able to sense before. Muscles cut and reattached poorly, sometimes to entirely the wrong muscle group. Half-healed damage to his internal organs, some looking to be from blows and others looking like he'd been stabbed, repeatedly, and healed just enough to stop the bleeding. Some of the scar tissue from old injuries seemed likely to be obstructing the full function of his organs...pain was the least of the side-effects of all this abuse, and that had to be excruciating, for all the poor child didn't seem aware of it anymore. *Every* bone, save his spine, showed the buildup and ridges of repeated breaks - it took a lot longer for such 'scars' to fade, if they even did on their own, than scars on the skin. And she hadn't even had him summon his wings yet...

She'd hoped she'd be able to set things to rights with one long, exhausting session of surgery, and a number of additional healers to help heal him from it fully before he woke. But this was far more than could be handled all at once. Even one limb at a time would be difficult...and as malnourished and weakened as his body was, it would be risky to do even the first too soon. Yet he would recover faster in *every* way with less stress on his body...

No, wait, she was getting ahead of herself. She needed to get the sketches and diagrams done first, then she could use them to consult with the others who would need to help, and they could all figure out the best way to proceed *together*. One step at a time.

This was enough for a first look. She'd start by sketching out the generalities and basics, then add to each section after focusing in on them.

"Thank you, Xiao. Now I'm going to start sketching, and I won't need you for anything for a little while. I do recommend you have some of that tea, it should be nearly done now, and I believe you are in more pain than you are properly aware of."

The young adeptus looked very confused, and bit his lip for a moment before speaking.

"How can honorable one start sketching when you haven't cut this one open yet?"

Madame Ping's heart stopped, and the sound of breaking pottery came from the corner with the stove.

At the sound of the crash, and the silence that followed, Xiao forced himself to look up briefly. Honorable one and Bosacius were both staring at him...why? Was he not supposed to ask questions? But honorable one had said to, if he had any, and...maybe it was a trick, again.

“This one apologizes, this one did not mean to cause a disruption with his ignorance...”

The honorable one shook herself, and when she spoke, she sounded upset.

“No, no, little one, you did nothing wrong. But...why did you think I was going to...cut you open?”

If she was upset, he *must’ve* done something wrong. But he was getting used to the idea that they wouldn’t tell him what was wrong, here. He wondered when they’d get tired of counting his transgressions and just let him pay for them...

“How else would honorable one view this one’s bones?”

“Little whirlwind, is that what you thought I meant when I told you what was happening today?”

Xiao could feel Bosacius coming closer, but didn’t look up. He wasn’t allowed to kneel, or take a properly submissive posture, but if he kept his gaze down maybe ‘upset’ wouldn’t become ‘angry’...and they were both upset, he could hear it in their voices, feel it in their presences, they were deeply upset and while he was pretty sure Bosacius wouldn’t punish him, honorable one was still an unknown quantity...

“Of course....I don’t understand. Isn’t that the reason for the tea? So this one will hold still while it’s done?”

“No, no of course not...it’s just to try to make a tense situation easier on you...”

Bosacius was next to the chair now, rubbing his shoulder. He wasn’t sure why the yaksha did that so much. He heard honorable one shifting position, and tensed. Was she going to hit him now? He deserved it, he was being stupid and ignorant about something and it was causing her trouble and...

“Little one, you know how you can sense someone’s presence, and some things about them when you do?”

She sounded calmer now. Was he not going to be punished? Again? He was starting to wish they’d just get to it and get it over with, let it stop hanging over his head...

“Yes, honorable one.”

“Well, healers can sense a lot more about a person, though we usually have to be touching them. We can feel injuries and scars inside the body, sense if there is illness or poison present, and with practice, we can get a very detailed picture of how a person is put together and where they’re hurt. This is called a reading, and we use it to target areas that need healing, among other things. That’s what I was doing when I held your hands earlier.”

He shivered, suddenly feeling very cold. He really, really didn’t want to get on honorable one’s bad side. She hadn’t said it outright, but such an ability would also show her the perfect ways to strike him, how to hurt him without killing him, how to do *precisely* the amount of damage she, or Master Morax, wanted done.

Xiao wondered if she was in charge of punishments, then...

“Readings are how I’m viewing your bones today, Xiao. I don’t *need* to cut you open to see them, and I won’t. Nothing we’re doing this afternoon should hurt you, though it’s revealing to me just how much you’re already hurting. I hope you’ll try the tea and let it help.”

Already hurting? Physically, he hurt less than he ever remembered. She wasn’t making sense.

Again.

He was so very, very tired of nothing making sense.

But if drinking another nasty concoction would make them happy, would get that terrifying upset-ness the rest of the way gone...

“This one will drink the tea as requested.”

“Thank you.”

He'd never said he *wouldn't*. Was his behavior here so bad they simply *assumed* he'd disobey?

....he supposed it probably was....he'd never have dared act as he had been, if he'd been in Master Moharus' domain...

What was *wrong* with him?

Why was it so *cold* in here? Xiao shivered and pulled his legs up onto the chair, then froze, waiting to see if honorable one took offense. She didn't even seem to notice, instead sighing and moving away again. A moment later he heard something scraping on paper, and figured she must have started sketching.

Something warm and solid brushed against his hand, and Xiao jumped, only to realize it was only a mug of the tea he was supposed to drink. He took it, staring at it for a long moment. At least it was warm...

“Are you alright, little whirlwind?”

Why was he asking that *now*? In front of honorable one? Not that he'd really give another answer anyway, he supposed.

“This one is well.”

Why did that make Bosacius flinch?

...he didn't really want to ask right now.

Might as well drink the tea....

Anticipating a taste as foul as the broth, Xiao swallowed it quickly, but was pleasantly surprised to find it wasn't nearly as bad. Instead of being all thick and coating his tongue with flavors he didn't like and little bits of grit that stuck around forever, it was light and watery and a little sweet...he didn't really mind it at all.

He wasn't sure how Bosacius figured that out - he didn't say anything - but the yaksha gently took the empty mug from his hand, refilled it, and brought it back. This time he drank it more slowly.

After awhile, he realized he felt...better. He hadn't even been aware of hurting, but apparently honorable one was right, because as some of it lifted the difference was...wonderful. It felt like a weight had been dragging every part of him down and now it was going away, and he felt more relaxed than he had since...since the bath, and longer than he could remember before that. His eyes no longer felt such a strong pull to the floor, but he kept his gaze low anyway. It would be poor repayment of this gift to lessen his respect for the honorable one.

The warmth in his belly helped with the cold a little, too, though he was still shivering.

Miraculous as this tea was, he knew it didn't change his situation. He still hadn't heard how Master Morax was going to handle his near-breach of the contract, or when he'd be punished for all the things he kept doing wrong, or how much longer he'd be considered to be 'healing'.

It didn't change all he'd done, and all he knew he'd wind up doing in the future.

It didn't change the fact that he was a monster.

Chapter End Notes

For those who didn't see the note I left on 'Oops?', updates will be less frequent for awhile, do to some stuff in my life I need to take care of. This hopefully won't take more than a couple months, and I'll still be writing whenever I have the brain to do so, but it is most definitely going to affect how much I can get done.

On the bright side, I have the next couple chapters pretty thoroughly outlined, so for this fic at least, that should be the *only* holdup for the time being.

Temptation and Despair

Chapter Notes

I apologize for this chapter.

TW: Vomit (both action and substance), self hatred, addiction, withdrawal, despair, thoughts of suicide, depression - if I missed something please tell me!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Bosacius was worried.

He knew something was wrong, terribly so, but his little whirlwind showed no willingness to talk about...whatever it was. Ever since he'd woken up to see the obvious signs of hours of weeping in the kid's red, swollen eyes, he'd been trying to figure out *why* Xiao'd been so upset. But other than saying it wasn't about the events of the day before, the kid wouldn't say *anything* about it. He'd either stay silent, or change the subject.

Beyond that, the kid had been even quieter than usual the whole day, showing little to no interest in what was going on around him. Granted, there hadn't been a lot to *be* interested in - the yaksha had had to spend the morning working on reports, and it must have been boring sitting there watching him do so. But there had been no fidgeting, no questions...at least now he knew why Xiao had been even *quieter* after he'd told him about the evaluation. As horrifying as *that* was.

He wasn't sure whether it would be better to keep pushing or just watch the kid like a hawk. He didn't want to stress Xiao further, and didn't want to risk pushing him away, but his little whirlwind had already shown a disturbing tendency to work himself up, convincing himself something terrible would happen, or that he had done something horribly wrong, when it wasn't the case. Bosacius didn't *think* the kid was the sort to do anything drastic over whatever was going on in his head, but he could easily work himself into a panic attack if he spiraled too much.

At least he seemed to like the tea...for all it was medicinal and so had to be limited. *Anything* with the slightest nutritional content that Xiao would drink without a fuss was a victory, to his mind. And maybe he'd be able to find a more normal tea that would suit him, too.

And maybe the kid could get more broth down if he alternated it with tea...it was worth trying.

"Alright, little one, I think we're done here. Thank you."

Xiao immediately dismissed his wings, and once they were gone, the tension seemed to drain from the kid's shoulders. It was obvious he still wasn't comfortable showing them to others, but that would likely take a long time to fix. For now...it was getting late.

Later than they'd intended this to take, actually, but it was no surprise that Madame Ping's hands had shaken for awhile, given Xiao's question.

"How much of this tea can Xiao have, Madame Ping? I know you have to be careful with anything medicinal..."

The healer paused in her cleanup, tilting her head in thought.

“No more for today, I think, and no more than six cups a day in the future, and for no longer than two weeks. After that its effectiveness will taper off.”

Better than he'd hoped.

“Thanks. Xiao, how about some broth before bed? We can try a few other teas too, and see if you like any of them.”

A short nod, gaze still low, and Xiao moved to follow him. Bosacius frowned. No grimace, no protest about how he didn't 'require' food? He was showing too much life to have withdrawn again, thankfully, but the yaksha worried he was close. *Why*, though? What was going through that head of his?

He sighed. If the little whirlwind wouldn't tell him, there was only so much he could do.

When they got to the kitchen, he set the pot of broth to thawing - there wasn't much left, he'd have to let Madame Ping know - along with two teapots to boil, before pulling out about half a dozen tea tins. Hopefully at least one would appeal.

Silence descended once he'd finished preparing the mugs for tea and broth, the same tense silence that had hung around them all day.

“You did well today, little whirlwind.”

“I upset you and honorable one. How is that doing well?”

He had to pause for a moment to think how best to answer that.

“The upset was not because of you. We were upset that we - I - had not communicated to you what was going to happen accurately, and that you might have suffered as a result, thinking you were going to be hurt. Despite this, you *asked* for clarification when you were confused, and that is something we *all* want you to do.”

“I understand.”

He clearly didn't, the confusion was clear on the kid's face, but unfortunately he suspected the confusion was tied to the things simple explanations couldn't solve. Bosacius was glad that, at least around him, Xiao didn't hide his emotions so much anymore...it made it easier to help him, and was a good sign in general. If only he could figure out the key to getting his little whirlwind to trust the *others* who so badly wanted to help him...especially Morax. He knew how much it hurt his friend that the kid was still terrified of him.

The whistles of the teapots interrupted the yaksha's thoughts, and he quickly poured the boiling water into each of the mugs he'd prepared for tea. The broth, too, was ready - and as he filled one mug with it, he realized there was only enough broth for about half a mug more.

Might as well see if the kid could stomach a little more, with the tea to wash away the flavor.

He got down one more mug and emptied the pot into it, setting the pot aside to be washed later, then began to ferry the bewildering number of mugs to the table, all in front of Xiao. He set the tea tins next to their mugs so he wouldn't forget which was which - he'd never had Morax's discerning taste for tea - and then couldn't help a grin when he looked up and saw a consternated expression on his little whirlwind's face.

“I don't expect you to drink *all* the tea, little whirlwind. Just taste it, and see if you like any of

them. I thought you might like to wash out the taste of the broth with something more than water.”

He’d left the half-mug of extra broth on the counter - he’d bring it over later, if this went well. At least the kid seemed less disturbed now that he knew he wasn’t expected to finish everything.

After a moment, Xiao chugged the broth in his typical fashion, grimaced, and reached for the right-most mug of tea. He took a big swallow - no doubt to clear out the broth - then grimaced and set it aside, reaching for the next, of which he took a more cautious sip. That one apparently didn’t suit either, but the third one did, and the young adeptus seemed to relax as he sipped at it. Bosacius stepped forward to check the tin - mint with a hint of qingxin. Ah. That made sense, mint was good for an upset stomach. He smiled at Xiao, and took the tins and mugs of the two rejects away.

He’d pushed enough this morning. Maybe just letting the silence sit would work better now, for all something screamed at him to figure out what was wrong before it exploded in all their faces. That instinct was *why* he’d been pushing, when all his experience and training said patience was the key with trauma...mortal children couldn’t cause nearly as much damage, in a panic, as his whirlwind had the theoretical ability to.

But it was clear the pushing didn’t help, and might be counterproductive, just as he should have known it would be.

“What do you think, little whirlwind? Can you handle a little more broth, with that to settle your stomach after?”

The kid eyed the mug on the counter with trepidation, and heaved a deep sigh.

“You want me to.”

“Yes. The more nutrition you get, the faster you’ll recover.”

That doubtful look again - he had yet to convince the kid the broth did any good at all - but he nodded.

“I will try.”

He grinned and took the long way around to give Xiao a head-skritch in passing, and grinned wider when the kid leaned into it. Maybe whatever the problem was had resolved itself, when the rest of the day went more smoothly...he snagged the mug and handed it to the little whirlwind, promptly taking it back after he downed it.

Xiao did look a little green at first, so this probably was about all he could handle - but that faded quickly as he gulped the last of the mint-and-qingxin tea.

“Thank you. I know you don’t believe us when we say it helps.”

His little whirlwind just looked down at the table for a moment, before nodding acknowledgement of his words. Bosacius supposed that was the best he’d get, today.

“Do any of the other three suit your tastes?”

Xiao hesitated, then tested them.

The first, a fancy rosehip tea that Madame Ping imported for her own tastes, he practically *spat* back into the mug. Bosacius smothered a chuckle as he cleared the tin and mug out of the way. The other two, however, were deemed acceptable - a chamomile mint mixture that Madame Ping

insisted put her to sleep, but Indy claimed woke her up nicely, and an odd sunsettia and qingxin blend that he had no idea existed before now.

“Well, that gives us three options for something nice to drink, right? And maybe we can sort out something more to your tastes to eat based on these.”

Oh, that nod was filled with doubt, but *Bosacius* at least was feeling hopeful.

It had taken *forever* for Bosacius to go to sleep this time. He'd insisted on Xiao going to bed right away, but had, from the sound of it, stayed up doing more paperwork for what seemed like *hours*. It was hard to lie there for so long, keeping his eyes closed and all tension out of his body...the man was entirely too good at reading Xiao, and he knew if he tensed up, even for a moment, Bosacius would *know* he was faking. Just like he'd known something was off all morning, and kept *asking* and *asking*... Xiao'd been glad when he finally gave up.

He knew Bosacius meant well. For now. But he'd argue if he knew Xiao wasn't sleeping, and if he found out how close Xiao kept coming to breaking the contract...he didn't want to know how the yaksha would respond. Bosacius' acceptance of him seemed entirely based on the idea that none of his terrible deeds had been done willingly. If he learned otherwise...learned *how badly* Xiao was starting to crave eating dreams again...

He knew all the kindness and gentleness he'd been receiving here was probably a facade. Maybe not Bosacius, but with everyone else. One misstep, one offense significant enough to justify it to themselves, and it would be ripped away. Master had said it himself, when he'd made the 'contract' - breaking the rules would result in a punishment commensurate with the breach. He'd come so close more than once. Not just with dreams, but with those mortal children...he knew it was just luck they hadn't been hurt when he lost control.

Time was running out, and he felt like he was drowning in what it left behind.

Eventually, he'd slip up. Probably sooner than later.

When he did...Master hadn't specified how he would be punished. Best case scenario, he would be disposed of swiftly and mercifully. Worst case, he'd be bound into torment for the entertainment of others for the next few decades. He didn't *think* he'd be punished by being made to hurt others...the terms of the contract certainly implied otherwise.

Or maybe he'd just be cast out, tossed as a bone to some other god for some concession or other. He didn't want *that*, either.

Waiting, knowing some extreme punishment was coming, but not what it *was*, was a torment in itself. He almost wanted to give in and provoke it to come on *his* terms, when *he* was ready.

Almost.

But not really.

He didn't want it to *ever* come...

As the night wore on, though, and Bosacius finally went to sleep, and his dreams lit up the room once more, Xiao wasn't sure he'd be able to prevent it. Noseplugs and hiding in the corner wasn't enough anymore...he slipped quietly out of the room and hid in his wings in the hallway outside the door.

At least that way he couldn't see the glow.

At least the scent was fainter, here.

But with the scent of Bosacius' dreams less overwhelming, he detected another...and it was harder to resist the dreams of one less important to him...sobbing quietly, he wondered if it was better back in the room, with the glow and the stronger scent but where he had more strength to resist.

His stomach twisted, wanting that wonderful, terrible dream substance inside it. All the liquid from earlier sloshed around, and suddenly he felt sick, and hot and cold at the same time, and he wasn't going to be able to keep it down...

The teleport to the kitchen was almost instinctive, and Xiao was vomiting into the waste bin in short order. He felt utterly miserable, and it dragged on until his stomach had ejected every last trace of not-dreams. He curled around the bin, still sobbing quietly, waiting to see if there would be more heaves -

- and suddenly realized he couldn't smell the dreams anymore.

Well, he *could*, but only very faintly. The stench of his own vomit covered it up.

Xiao laughed a little hysterically as he realized he had his solution. It would bring even more questions if he failed to clean up with the right timing when morning came, but if he couldn't smell the dreams, he could resist them.

He dipped a hand into the bin, and generously smeared the substance under his nose.

It worked for the first session of dreaming, though he had to return to the kitchen to reapply it multiple times. The stink wasn't strong enough to cover up the dream-scent once the vomit dried.

It helped for the second too, if not as much...

By the third, he kept finding himself standing in front of the red door that led to honorable one's private rooms. He tried to prevent it by returning to 'his' room, but he just wound up standing over Bosacius...and he couldn't, he *wouldn't* risk that. It was like the more time passed, the stronger the pull of dreams got...he wasn't sure how much longer he could last, how much longer he could tell himself he *didn't* want them, that eating dreams was terrible and wrong and hurt too much except it hurt *not* to eat them too now, and he was so *cold* except when he was too *hot* and he couldn't stop sweating either way....

Mercifully, there wasn't a fourth round, and as the first hint of dawn showed in the false sky Xiao started cleaning up the evidence of the night. Wiped his face clear of tears and sweat, cleaned off the remaining vomit and hoping it wouldn't be questioned in the waste bin. Or noticed. Then he snuck back into bed so that Bosacius would think he was still asleep when the yaksha woke.

He hoped Bosacius wouldn't ask much of him today. It was going to be hard enough to maintain control as it was.

The world seemed so hazy...it was hard to keep track of what was going on. Not that it mattered, as long as he kept it together. As long as he kept control, didn't have any more 'flashbacks', didn't hurt anyone, didn't worry anyone.

He swallowed his broth without comment or hesitation, then the tea he was handed after. It sat heavier and less steadily in his stomach than usual, but he made it stay down.

"Are...you alright, little whirlwind?"

"This one is well."

Bosacius made a frustrated sound, but didn't ask anything more, so that was fine. He was in control. It was fine.

It was quiet back in the room, with only the sound of paper rustling and a quill scratching. Xiao wasn't entirely sure how long they'd been here, but he didn't mind. It was easy to be good when nothing was expected of him.

And he had to be good. At all costs, he had to be good.

He didn't really remember why, but it was important.

He kept his gaze low, his face still, and his mouth shut.

That was being good, right?

"I'm sorry, little whirlwind. There's just no way around it. I can't take you with me to the borders, and I can't neglect my duties, especially when we know Sinaria is likely to attack again. I'll be gone most of the day, but it's not for two more days, so we have some time for you to get used to the idea..."

Why did mighty one sound so worried? He'd be fine. Alatus knew how to behave. He didn't need watching.

Wait. Sinaria?

A little bit of memory filtered through the haze, and Xiao remembered why he should be worried. He had to keep an eye on Bosacius, because Bosacius didn't always know where the danger was, and Bosacius must not be hurt...

But Xiao was dangerous. Xiao could hurt him, *would* hurt him if he slipped up at night...

Maybe it was better for Bosacius to leave, after all.

More of the broth. It was easier to drink it when he was like this, but for some reason that seemed to upset Bosacius.

Why?

Wasn't it supposed to be *good* for him to drink it?

He felt so *cold*.

Green eyes stared into his own, and he blinked. Bosacius was kneeling in front of him. Why was he kneeling in front of him?

“Xiao, I know you're having a hard time today, but I need you to focus. Madame Ping has sorted out a possible treatment plan, and we need to know if you're okay with it. Can you handle this right now? It's okay if you can't, we can go over it another day.”

“This one is well. This one can do as needed. I will listen.”

There was silence for a long moment, then a sigh.

“Alright. Alright. If you say you can do this I won't argue...but if you have any questions,*please* ask them, alright?”

He nodded.

He blinked. When had they gotten to the dayroom?

Oh, right. He was supposed to focus, and listen.

“We're pretty sure we can fix the damage to your wings, or at least enough of it for you to fly one day, but it won't be easy. It'll take multiple surgeries, each with several healers aiding, and while you'll be unconscious for the surgery itself you're likely to ache a bit after. The same needs doing for the rest of your body, Cloud Retainer says *all* your bones need to be scraped or the weight will interfere with flight...”

Bones...scraped? Fear leapt up in him, but Bosacius seemed calm. He must have missed the part of the explanation that made that less terrifying.

Or Bosacius was okay with him being hurt? He hadn't done something bad, had he? He couldn't remember...he suddenly realized he couldn't remember *most* of the day.

Was that good or bad?

If he'd hurt someone, surely they'd look more alarmed, or angry?

If he'd broken the rules, surely Master would be here, to enact the punishment?

Maybe...maybe he hadn't yet...

It was hard to think. Everything was confusing.

If he hadn't done the bad things yet...

Oh. This was supposed to be his...treatment plan, right?

"...and old scars are hampering the function of some organs, too. If we space out the surgeries, we should be able to avoid the side effects from drugging you into a dreamless sleep, and you should feel so much better once it's all done. But we can't start until..."

None of this made sense, but that didn't matter. It wasn't like he had a choice in what was coming. Such as he just accepted what was done with them, endured, and moved on.

He might be dead by the time they planned to start anyway. He didn't think he'd last another night without hurting someone, and surely Master would deal with him after that.

So for now, he just nodded whenever they looked to him for a response, and that seemed to be what they wanted.

Bosacius even smiled at him.

At first, Bosacius had thought that the nodding meant Xiao was paying attention and agreeing...but when Madame Ping left, he realized the kid still had a slightly glazed look in his eyes. Not that he got to see it for long, because as soon as he stood the little whirlwind's eyes were once more firmly on the floor.

He wasn't sure what to make of this. The kid wasn't acting like he'd retreated, exactly...but it was clear he wasn't fully aware of his surroundings either. It was almost like he was sick, but adeptly mostly didn't *get* sick...

Maybe he hadn't gotten enough sleep. The kid had been through a lot since he'd gotten here, and certainly needed his rest - and if that vomit in the waste bin was his, as Bosacius assumed, he'd clearly been up at least *part* of the night. And quiet about it, too, since the little whirlwind hadn't woken him up in the process.

Hopefully a chance to clean up and soak in a bath after his evening broth would help. And it would

only be one mug, because clearly that extra half-mug had been too much the night before. If only the kid would open up... *talk* to him about what was wrong...patience was all well and good, but he was worried.

At least they seemed to have succeeded in dodging all Xiao's triggers today, so far.

When they got to the kitchen, Bosacius was glad to see that Madame Ping had apparently set the pot of broth to warm on her way to her rooms. The less time sitting around in awkward silence, the better, and his little whirlwind wasn't terribly...responsive...today.

He started a teapot heating as well and set up a mug with the mint and qingxin Xiao had appreciated the day before, in the hopes the mint would help, even if Xiao wasn't showing...well, anything. Not even a hint of his usual grimace when he'd had his broth earlier in the day.

If this didn't change tomorrow, he was going to have to consult with Madame Ping...or get him to let her examine him again, in case he'd somehow managed to pick up one of the handful of illnesses that *could* affect adepts. Incredibly unlikely, but...he couldn't think what could have him acting like this, and he'd noticed the kid randomly sweating throughout the day too. It *could* just be from fear - he'd been shaking fairly often, too - and being afraid would certainly account for the partial retreat - but he'd been around enough sick humans to know that they would sweat when they had a fever.

Oh, wait, you could feel a fever, right? How did the mortals do it...

Ah. On the forehead.

When tea and broth were ready, he set them in front of Xiao, then pressed his palm to the kid's head. It felt normal, as far as he could tell...but again, the little whirlwind didn't react at all. He drank his broth, then his tea, with no change in expression. Bosacius wasn't sure the kid had even *noticed* his hand.

*'Please, **please** just be a lack of sleep....'*

He struggled to act normal.

"So, little whirlwind, ready for a bath?"

He knew, after the way the day had gone, that he likely wouldn't get any excitement out of his little whirlwind over *anything*. It still made his heart twist when Xiao walked down the hill as if it were just another thing he had to do. He refused to give up hope, though - it would *have* to feel good for the kid to wash all that sweat off, right? To take a long soak in water hot enough to force him to relax? He'd make sure to tell another 'little whirlwind' story in the soaking pool, maybe it would help.

To his relief, once they were stripped and in the water, the kid *did* seem to get more alert, eyeing Bosacius as he washed as though he needed a reminder on what to do. He didn't say anything, but just seeing that glaze fade out of the kid's eyes was enough to reassure the yaksha. His little whirlwind was strong, and had more courage than he'd ever seen. *Whatever* was plaguing his mind, he'd work through it, and when he was ready...hopefully he'd talk about it. It would work out.

He made sure to provide as many skritches as he could while helping Xiao wash his hair. Unfortunately, while the kid leaned into them at first, the moment his hair was done he pulled away and refused any more. *Why?* What was going on behind those eyes, that blank face?

Xiao seemed unsettled in the soaking pool, constantly shifting around. That...couldn't be helping him to relax...maybe the story would work.

"Once there was a little whirlwind..."

Xiao *flinched*.

He wasn't sure whether to be glad he was reacting at all, or worried at such a reaction to one of the stories the kid usually seemed to enjoy so much...

"Xiao? What's wrong? Do you want me to stop?"

"No, it is fine."

He hesitated...but if he ignored what the kid said when he actually spoke up, it would only discourage him from doing so.

"...alright. The little whirlwind had made many friends in the adepti village, and one day they were all out gathering fruits when..."

Bosacius didn't get any further. Suddenly Xiao leapt out of the soaking pool, getting only a few steps away before falling to his knees in the grass and retching. The yaksha clambered out and hurried to his side as quickly as he could, pulling the kid's braid out of the way so it wouldn't trail through the sick.

'Don't rub his back, don't rub his back, remember what Madame Ping told you...'

He rubbed at the boy's nearest shoulder with one hand, and waited patiently for the kid to finish.

"Shh, it's alright, you aren't in trouble for anything, I promise. It's okay."

Unsurprisingly, the kid was shaking and crying. Clearly whatever had been building up had spilled over.

"It's alright, just let it out. We'll clean you up when it's all done, though perhaps not in the pools if they're a problem today for you...it's no trouble, really. I'm here for you. You'll be okay."

Xiao wished Bosacius wouldn't be so kind. He knew...knew that it was only because the yaksha thought he was like the whirlwind of his stories. He wasn't. He wasn't anything like that innocent spirit, he was a monster, and he couldn't hide it much longer, especially now that the blessed haze that had shielded him all day had left him...

He heaved again, though he didn't have anything left in his stomach. Tears dripped from his face,

and he didn't bother wiping them away. What did it *matter*? It would all be over soon anyway. Tears weren't as bad as dream eating, and it was night now, and all too soon Bosacius and Madame Ping would go to bed and...

He didn't bother stopping his sob of despair. He didn't want to. He didn't. But he knew he would and he knew Bosacius would hate him after and that hurt more than whatever Master would choose for his punishment.

"Shhh, let it out, it'll be alright, little whirlwind..."

He flinched at the nickname. No, it wouldn't be.

"It'll be alright. Are you done heaving, do you think?"

Probably. His stomach still twisted, but in an awful sort of anticipation, not...like it had been. Xiao nodded.

"Alright then, go ahead and sit down."

He obeyed, eyes on his knees. He was ruining even the last bit of time before Bosacius knew the truth....shouldn't he be trying to make it happy for him? After all Bosacius had done for him? Xiao tried to smile at the yaksha when he returned with a wet cloth from the poolside, but it didn't feel right, and probably didn't look right either.

He couldn't do *anything* right.

Bosacius didn't comment though, instead just wiping off his face and chin, where some vomit had dripped down. Then he took the cloth over to the basket under the tree, and returned with clean clothes for Xiao.

For a long moment, he just stared at them.

He didn't deserve clean clothes. He barely deserved *rags*.

But...he couldn't disappoint Bosacius.

The fabric was too soft, too gentle on his clean skin, and he wanted to cry again. Why wouldn't the haze come back? Or better yet, why couldn't he just *leave*, like he had before, when he'd felt the gem pain again? If he was going to ruin everything, why did he have to be *here* for it? But he *was*, and he couldn't escape it, and all these kindnesses *hurt* because he knew he was going to repay them in the *worst* way and he didn't want to but he remembered last night and he didn't think he could stop himself...

He truly was a monster. He knew how to stop himself. If he died, he couldn't hurt anyone.

But he didn't want to die.

He didn't know *why*. Living was terrible. But whenever he thought of ending it he started shaking and couldn't. What kind of monster would put their own wretched life above hundreds, thousands of others? What kind of *demon*?

"Xiao? Will you tell me what's wrong?"

More tears slipped down his cheeks as he shook his head. Telling him would just bring his hatred sooner, if he was even believed, and he couldn't bring himself to do that. Even if maybe Bosacius

could prevent it, he...he couldn't bear to lose what little time he had left. As much as the kindness *hurt*, as much as it hurt to know he was cared for and didn't deserve it, he still wanted it.

Like he wanted to live.

Like he wanted *dreams*.

Bosacius heaved a deep sigh, and skritch'd his head, and Xiao almost pulled away. He didn't deserve the comfort, didn't deserve to feel good for even a moment, but Bosacius didn't deserve to be pushed away either, and Bosacius was more important.

"Alright. I hope you'll trust me enough to tell me eventually, but for now...hopefully things will look better in the morning. A good night's rest is good for making the world look brighter."

It never had for *him*, but he wasn't going to ruin these last moments by arguing. Xiao nodded and stood, and tried to control his sobbing on the way back to the room. It would only worry Bosacius, and if a good night's rest did the yaksha so much good...maybe it would be easier on him if he had one before he learned of Xiao's betrayal.

When they got to the room they were sharing, and Bosacius started to turn towards his bed...Xiao hesitated for a moment, then threw his arms around the yaksha's waist in the tightest hug he could.

He knew it was probably his last chance for one.

Bosacius jumped a little, then knelt down and enveloped Xiao in all four arms, hugging him back. He *knew* it was greedy, but Xiao couldn't help sobbing into the yaksha's chest...even if Bosacius didn't know it, this was goodbye, at least goodbye to what they'd had. After a moment, one of the yaksha's arms lifted and began to stroke Xiao's head.

"Shhh, it's alright. It'll all look better in the morning, and then we'll talk, okay? If you're willing..."

Would it make him feel better to think they would? He wouldn't *want* to, once he knew...but if it made things easier on him now...Xiao nodded once against Bosacius' chest.

"Just...just not tonight..."

"Alright, then. Not tonight."

They stayed that way for a few precious minutes, before he couldn't bear it anymore, and went to pretend to sleep on the bed.

When the dream-scent first reached him, he *tried* to resist. For all that he knew he'd fail, he desperately didn't want to hurt anyone, didn't want to see those blank eyes on *anyone* ever again, much less someone he *knew*, didn't want to break the contract.

He shoved cloth up his nose again.

He tried to vomit, but everything had come up earlier, and there wasn't any left to use to block the smell.

He went out to the hall and closed his eyes and held his nose, but he felt his surroundings shift and

when he opened his eyes again his nose was inches from Bosacius' dream, his mouth already open, his stomach twisting and folding and *demanding*...

'NO!'

It wouldn't be him. If he had to destroy someone tonight, it at *least* wouldn't be him. He wrenched himself away, instinctively seeking the other dreamer in the subspace -

- and rematerializing by honorable one's bed.

He folded his arms tightly over his pleading stomach, backing away, struggling not to reach for that brilliant glow. He sobbed quietly as his mouth watered so heavily that drool spilled over his chin. It almost felt like there were chains dragging him to the bed, and he heard his old master laughing in the recesses of his mind as he took one shaky step after another back to it.

He knew the dream would be delicious, so sweet, so soft and light...

He knew he would feel *strong* from the first bite, like nothing and no one could hurt him...

He knew the echoed happiness that was not his own would tear at his soul...

He knew he was too weak, too cowardly, too *evil* to resist.

At least now they'd *know* what kind of monster he was.

Hating himself with every fiber of his being, Xiao reached for honorable one's dream.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter might take awhile with everything going on, but please don't murder me in the interim, or I'll **never** be able to get it written!

Disasters and Control

Chapter Notes

Fair warning, this chapter **hurts**. If you are not in a good headspace and/or have major issues with one of the listed trigger warnings, you might want to wait until a better time to read it.

TW this chapter: Addiction, withdrawal, head injury, loss of control, suicidal ideation, attempted suicide by authority figure, confinement, mild claustrophobia, self hatred...as usual, I'm coming up with this list in the wee hours of the morning, so if I missed something please let me know so I can add it.

Something was wrong.

Bosacius wasn't sure what woke him up...just that something was wrong. He didn't hear crying, so he didn't think it was Xiao having a nightmare...

He realized he didn't sense Xiao in his bed *at all*.

The yaksha shot upright, spreading his senses as far as he could - why wasn't the kid asleep? He'd been acting so oddly the last day or two, but he was *sure* he'd been asleep before Bosacius was, he never let himself drift off until the little whirlwind's breathing evened out and he finally relaxed into sleep...

He sensed the kid's presence, and was out of bed a moment later. What in *Teyvat* was Xiao doing in Madame Ping's *bedroom*?! And...when had the kid gotten so strong...his presence nearly matched the yaksha's own now -

He skidded around the kitchen corner and opened the door to the healer's private rooms, noting absently that it was once more red. Xiao was *obsessive* about following the rules, why would he ignore a red door -

The door to her bedroom was closed too, and he opened it to an alarming scene - Xiao standing over the healer's sleeping form, one hand reached out to the space above her head, eyes seeming to reflect a light that wasn't there.

"Little whirlwind?"

Everything seemed to happen at once.

Madame Ping woke up, and rolled off the far side of the bed.

Wind, lit with the power of anemo, began to swirl around the room, and Xiao spun to face him, hissing. The boy's face was streaked with tears, his chin coated in drool that still dripped, and his eyes - his eyes were filled with utter despair, and anger, and something Bosacius didn't know how to read.

Bosacius pressed electro into the dragon scale that hung at his hip before stepping forward slowly. Electro was not suited to confining someone without hurting them; geo was. And the kid had grown so strong...he wasn't sure he'd have enough power to hold Xiao if necessary, even if he wielded a more suitable element.

"Xiao...calm down...wherever you think you are isn't real, it's a memory or a nightmare. You're safe in Madame Ping's subspace, in Morax's realm."

"Go away!"

He stopped moving forward, spreading his hands wide.

"I'm not going to hurt you, but you *need to calm down*. You're in an enclosed room, and you could hurt someone."

He wished he could take this slow. But Madame Ping likely wasn't capable of withstanding the growing storm in the room...the yaksha shifted, bracing his feet better as the winds strengthened.

"I know! I know, and I can't stop it, I have to have it..."

"Have to have what, little whirlwind?"

But suddenly he knew. Madame Ping had been *asleep*, Xiao's eyes had reflected something Bosacius couldn't see...

"I don't want to hurt you. Go AWAY!"

The wind rose further in a howl as fresh tears poured down the kid's face. Bosacius instinctively reached out, to hold him, comfort him -

"You won't hurt me, I'm fine, please calm - "

The wind snatched him up and he felt his head hit the wall.

The alarm yanked Morax out of a deep sleep, his skin feeling like it sparked with electro. Bosacius, then...where? Muzzily, he remembered that Bosacius shouldn't be in the field right now...

Madame Ping's. Her bedroom.

'What?!'

He didn't even bother changing out of his sleeping robes. If Bosacius was using the emergency signal, speed was essential. The dragon simply snatched up his spear and teleported to the entrance of his own subspace, then to Madame Ping's, racing through the passthrough.

At first, all seemed quiet, but as he got closer to the healer's rooms, he heard an unfamiliar voice shouting - the door to her rooms was already open, and he didn't slow down. How had a danger

beyond his marshal's ability to handle gotten all the way *here*?

Morax stepped into the bedroom just in time to see a burst of anemo *pick up* his marshal and slam him headfirst into a wall.

Bosacius didn't move.

Snarling, the dragon turned to the one who'd attacked his friend, raising his spear to strike -

And summoned stone to surround them instead.

It was the young adeptus, for all he looked like an entirely different being than the child they'd been beginning to know -

There was a sound from the far side of the bed, and he realized the winds, already dangerously strong, were still rising. He clamped down a shield on the child, then gagged him with more stone when he *shrieked* with earsplitting volume. Priorities.

"Madame Ping?"

"I - I'm fine. Don't hurt the child, I don't think this was on purpose..."

She had started moving to check Bosacius as soon as he'd cut off the winds, he realized, and waited for her to report. Xiao's fate likely depended on the outcome.

"Well?"

Morax sounded far calmer than he was. His gut twisted, wondering if he'd misjudged the child, if he truly was the beast reports had claimed...he certainly looked the part at the moment, with that glare and drool dripping off his chin.

A glare that seemed to hold as much terror as anger, somehow, now that he took the time to consider it...

"Bosacius will be fine. He is merely unconscious, and will likely wake on his own in a few hours. He's suffered far worse in the past."

"I see. Do you wish to be present for the interrogation? You said you did not believe this was on purpose, yet he seems aware of his surroundings, and is no longer under the control of his old master."

"Yes. Something he said before you got here...I have my suspicions, but will need to hear more before I can be sure. Will you wait for me to move Bosacius to a patient room?"

"Of course."

The young adeptus shrieked again behind the gag, struggling futilely against the stone that held him. Morax struggled to retain a neutral expression as he waited. One way or another, Xiao had transgressed. The severity of the transgression, and whether he had actually broken the contract, remained to be determined - though he suspected the contract remained intact. His magic wasn't paining him, the way it would around an unpunished contract breaker.

And yet...

And yet, Xiao was still a child. A traumatized, abused child, who had barely begun to recover.

He hoped Madame Ping was right, but could not see what excuse there could be for this...

By the time the healer returned, Morax was fighting the disturbing notion that all the child's struggles were only for show. He fought to free himself from the stone physically, shrieked around the gag - but he felt no flares from the shield that would imply an attempt to break it or to teleport. But why would he only *pretend* to want free?

Once Madame Ping was seated on her bed, Morax took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. There was reason to believe things were not as they seemed, yet clearly there was danger present, if he misjudged things. He needed not only the appearance of calm, but to remain clearheaded.

"Madame Ping. From your perspective, what happened here tonight?"

He did his best to ignore the continuing muffled shrieks, the tears that made him question the glare.

"I woke, I assume, when Bosacius entered the room. Young Xiao was standing over me, reaching for my face, but he immediately swung around to face Bosacius, and called up his power. I rolled off the bed to get out of the way, so I didn't catch everything that happened - but while Bosacius seemed to assume Xiao was caught in a flashback, I...doubt that is the case. At one point, the child said he couldn't stop it, that he had to have 'it'....Morax, those are words of desperate need, not of maliciousness, not of one who doesn't know where they are."

Xiao struggled harder within the mound of stone Morax had summoned, eyes squeezed shut.

"I see. And your speculations?"

"I would prefer to hold off on that until we've seen what he has to say, Morax. If I'm wrong, it could stir up unnecessary additional trouble."

He nodded, and turned back to the struggling child.

"Xiao, I am going to give you the opportunity to speak in your defense. Use it wisely."

He dissolved the gag, bracing for more shrieking. To his relief, while the glare resumed, the volume did not.

"This one has no defense. Just dispose of this one, and be done with it."

That was...not what he'd expected. He hadn't been sure what to expect - pleas for mercy, perhaps - but it wasn't this.

He also had the uncomfortable feeling that when the young adeptus said 'dispose of', he meant 'kill'.

"So you are saying you entered this room, and attacked one who has been kind to you, for no reason at all? I find that hard to believe."

The reply was immediate, and rang false, forced, to his ears.

"Yes! I'm a monster, a *demon*, now just *kill me* already before I *destroy everything!*"

Xiao's frantic struggles resumed, along with floods of fresh tears. The dragon swallowed hard. Madame Ping was right, there was definitely something more going on here.

"And why would you want to do that?"

The young adeptus' struggles ceased abruptly as he went limp within the stone, sobbing.

"*I don't! But I can't stop it, I want it too much, I was trying to break your contract so why haven't you just killed me yet?!"*

The pieces came together in his mind. Dream eating. Xiao had been trying to eat Madame Ping's dream.

If Bosacius hadn't gotten there when he did...

But he had. And Morax was not a god to punish people for what they *might have* done. The contract had *not* been broken - and for all any of them knew, the young adeptus would have found the strength to stop himself before it was.

A solution must be found. They needed to figure out why this was so difficult for him, when he clearly didn't actually *want* to hurt anyone. Hurting Bosacius had probably been an accident - given that they'd been sleeping in the same room, the yaksha's dreams had undoubtedly been more accessible, so if he'd been...intact...to interrupt Xiao here, it had to have been a deliberate choice to avoid harming him.

Regardless, he was not going to hurt the child, much less *kill* him, over what appeared to have been an incident mostly beyond Xiao's control.

The young adeptus must have read the shift in his intentions somehow, because suddenly he was struggling wildly *and* trying to break the shield, his voice screaming in a disturbing blend of terror and frustration.

"Just kill me! KILL ME! I won't stop, I can't stop, I'll HURT everyone, DESTROY everyone, I'm a monster, so just KILL me and stop me now, before it's too late! PLEASE! PLEASE KILL ME!"

Morax shook as he reformed the gag, unable to bear hearing more. He closed his eyes for a moment, struggling for control, before motioning for Madame Ping to precede him out of the room. He had to be rational. They had to make some hard decisions, and he couldn't make them with his instincts alone, or he'd likely make even more of a wreck of things.

Had he given the child a death sentence with that contract, asked him to willingly starve himself, without knowing it? On top of failing to ensure he knew he could refuse? He had to know. He already had so much to make up for, and he had to *know*...

He hadn't realized he'd halted in the hallway until Madame Ping gently took his hand and guided him to her sitting room.

Hopefully she had some ideas on how to handle this...he opened his mouth, but she spoke first.

"He shouldn't be able to drown us out from here, so please dissolve the gag, Morax. I admit he needs to be contained, at the moment, but stone would not be as comfortable for him as it is for you. His jaw must be aching already."

Oh. Oops. He closed his eyes and focused his senses on the other room, making sure he had the right construct before dissolving it.

"Done. Thank you for the reminder...."

The god took a deep breath. Despite his attempts to calm himself, he was still shaken, and scales

kept trying to ripple across his skin. No help for it.

“Is this my fault, can you tell? Whether I meant to or not, I forced him into a contract that forbade him from eating dreams...which I cannot permit, but does he need them to live? Has my contract been...starving him?”

His question seemed to startle the healer.

“Is that what you got from his words? No, Morax, those were not the reactions you would see from a starving person confronted with food. His behavior is far more like that of someone with an addiction, desperate for another dose.”

He blinked.

“Addiction? But he’s an adeptus...”

“There are a few substances that can affect adepts, we just know better than to mess with them, and most are hard to get or produce. Given the effect an eaten dream has, I can’t imagine it’s something a clan of healers would normally do, so I can only assume it’s something that bastard Moharus forced on the child from the start. It’s not a particularly effective method of execution, I would imagine, since the person needs to be asleep - but it makes sense, if it was a further means of control on the boy.”

Morax frowned, calming a little more. Addicted to dreams was better than needing them to survive, surely?

“I know little of addiction. Can we help him?”

Madame Ping hesitated, and worry spiked once more.

“Probably. Some addictions can be dangerous - even deadly - if cut off suddenly, in humans, but adepts are stronger...I’ve never *encountered* someone with a dream addiction, obviously, so I can’t say for certain how dangerous it will be to detoxify his system. We can’t wean him off slowly, given *what* he’s addicted to...”

She sighed.

“So we’ll just have to keep him away from dreams, be prepared for the way he might not always be in control of himself - like tonight - and try to treat his symptoms. And wait.”

A chill settled over him.

“That’s all we can do?”

“I’m afraid so, my friend.”

Odd, given how many gods had tried and failed to make him feel helpless, that a single child would so easily succeed.

Morax hated it.

Xiao stopped struggling as soon as the door closed. There was no point. He knew he couldn't get free - the stone held him so tightly he couldn't so much as twitch a finger - and clearly, his feeble struggles weren't enough to make him enough of a threat to deal with. So he sagged into the stone's support, ignoring the way the edge dug into his chest, and wept.

He'd hurt Bosacius.

He'd left the room so he wouldn't and Bosacius had shown up anyway, and he'd thrown him into a *wall*.

Honorable one had said he'd be fine, but...

At least...at least he hadn't hurt her...

This time...

If Master refused to deal with him properly, how long would it be before he *did* destroy someone? It was easier now, with everyone awake and no dreams to tempt him, but they wouldn't be that way forever. He...he didn't think he'd be able to stop himself from leaping on the nearest dream immediately, next time.

His stomach cramped, still twisting with *want*, and his body tried to shiver in the cold stone - an odd sensation, when there was no room to do so.

The stone blocking his mouth disappeared, and for a moment, Xiao found a slight relief in deep gulps of air. But it didn't take long to wonder why it had been removed. Was it in the way of whatever punishment had been decided on? There'd be one, surely. Even if Master *wasn't* going to dispose of him immediately, as he should, as Xiao had hoped he would - he'd broken the rules. He'd gone past a red door, he'd tried to break the contract. He'd *screamed* at the god, intentionally provoking him, trying to get him to kill him in a fit of anger if nothing else...and Master had just stood there and listened. Bound him up so he couldn't fight back, rendered him helpless and no longer a threat, and done *nothing* further.

Maybe...Master had left the room with honorable one. With the intended victim of his disobedience. Perhaps he wanted to discuss with her Xiao's punishment, how much pain she demanded as recompense for his offense against her?

Xiao tried to shiver again, and weeping became sobbing.

He'd...he'd hoped for a quick, clean death, even though he didn't deserve it. He'd caused too much pain, too much destruction. He'd hurt, killed, or eaten the dreams of too many innocents. Probably many of Master's own people, before Master Moharus had died - though Xiao had never really known where borders were, so he couldn't be sure.

It was only natural that his punishment, his end, would be drawn out and filled with pain.

He didn't deserve mercy.

He shouldn't *want* it.

He should *want* to pay the proper penance for his wrongs.

And he *did*... mostly...but he was afraid.

He was so horribly *selfish* that he was afraid of the pain, of death, of paying his debt...when he should be embracing the chance to do so.

The stone seemed to press in on him, like his miniature prison was shrinking extremely slowly. Xiao's muscles ached, and he wondered if that was what they'd decided on, if he would be slowly crushed over hours or days, here in honorable one's own bedroom, where she could derive satisfaction from watching...the thought terrified him, and the part of him not in stone shook and trembled, for all he knew it would be kinder than some deaths.

Kinder than he'd been permitted to be, sometimes...

Kinder than what Master Moharus might have picked, in Master's place.

It was hard to tell time in here, locked away in the mostly-dark, with only the glow of the gold-orange veins in the stone for light. How long had he been left here?

Did it matter?

At least...at least, while he was bound this way, he couldn't hurt anyone.

Time passed, and eventually Xiao's sobs faded and he found himself just...waiting. There was nothing he could do, anymore. There really never had been. Either...either Master would return, and he would learn how he would die, and it would be...over, at least, or Master would keep him...and the only reason for a god to keep a monster like him was to *use* him, as Master Moharus had. A deep ache filled his chest at the second possibility.

He...already knew he was not strong enough to resist those sort of orders.

Not strong enough to end things, himself.

That's why he'd hoped...hoped this would be enough to get Master to do it for him.

Light suddenly stabbed at Xiao's eyes, and he had to blink a few times before he realized it was coming from the hall. The door was open....Master was back...

Master stood there staring at him for a long moment, his face as unreadable as ever. Xiao tried to glare, tried to find the strength to provoke him further...but it was hard to feel anything but despair and dread.

He tried to stretch out his senses, to know what emotions filled the god's presence - the shield dulled things but - sorrow? Guilt? Why would he...

Master knelt in front of him, looking into his eyes. Xiao struggled not to look down. He *wanted* Master angry, he had to be as defiant as possible, even if he just wanted to curl up and hide in his wings somewhere no one would ever find him -

"Xiao. How are you feeling?"

'...what?'

Why was Master asking that?

...how should he *answer* that?

...what did it *matter*?

Oh. Right. Defiance. Maybe he shouldn't answer at all.

"Do you hurt anywhere?"

He stayed silent. Why was Master asking? Why did it *matter* if he hurt? Not that he... *did* ...really...just the usual pains, and some aches...but it didn't matter.

He tried to glare, but felt more wide-eyed.

Of course. If he couldn't control his own powers and body properly, why would his *face* do what he wanted?

Master heaved a deep sigh, and Xiao couldn't stop a flinch. He'd been trouble...he knew that, but he'd expected an immediate punishment, and instead Master had apparently spent a lot of time and attention on him over it. That meant it was going to be worse, right? It was always worse when *Master Moharus* sighed like that...

He deserved it. Whatever Master had come up with, he *deserved* it. He had to remember that.

"You're being moved to my private subspace. You clearly can't be trusted to follow Madame Ping's rules at the moment, and I am the only one capable of keeping you completely safe, from yourself *and* others, while I sleep. You will not have an opportunity to eat dreams there, and Madame Ping will come by to tend you while you...get over this."

'...what?'

This...made no sense. Master was talking as though he were...sick, or something. He wasn't sick, he'd tried to...worse than kill...Master's head healer. He'd thrown Master's marshal against the *wall* - Xiao found he was weeping again.

He wasn't sick, he was a monster. A rabid dog in need of putting down. A demon to be slain. He thought...he thought tonight had made that very clear. So why was Master...acting like this?

Or maybe the thing he was supposed to 'get over' was his punishment, and that would be enacted once they were in Master's residence? If...if such things were kept *that* private, it would explain why Bosacius thought they didn't happen. But...why would he be expected to *survive* his punishment, to expect treatment after?

Xiao didn't understand.

It didn't matter. His understanding, or not, wouldn't change anything.

Another sigh, and Master gestured. Xiao's stone prison lifted, carrying him with it, and followed the god out of the room. He swallowed hard...so Master *did* understand the threat he represented, if he was taking the extra effort to move him while still so thoroughly restrained. At least that meant he'd probably take measures to keep Xiao from hurting anyone, despite all the talk about protecting *him*, as if his safety were somehow of importance.

As soon as they'd left honorable one's subspace, the golden energy of geo spun about them in

geometric patterns, then sank away to reveal a passthrough set into a mountain cave entrance. Xiao had no idea where they were....he reminded himself it didn't matter. It *didn't*. It wasn't like he was likely to need to find it again, like he was likely to leave.

His miniature prison continued to follow Master smoothly, and when they were past the entrance, Xiao found himself blinking around at the ornately worked stone. The place felt...oppressively underground, but he couldn't help but find the murals formed into the stone, highlighted with glowing crystals, beautiful. He had a moment to stare at them - the ones by the entrance showed dragons in flight over mountaintops, clouds swirling above and below and around them, eyes picked out in glowing crystal hues - because Master paused to press a hand against the wall, eyes closed. A moment later, there was a loud rumbling, a sound of stone grating on stone - dust fell from the ceiling, stinging Xiao's eyes, and then it stopped.

"Until we are certain the addiction has cleared your system, you are to remain in this subspace. While I am awake, you are free to wander the areas that aren't sealed off - most of the sealed places are so for your own safety - so long as you return to your room when summoned."

Addiction? What was addiction? Was it some sort of poison that would be used in his punishment?

Master was walking, Xiao's stone restraint floating behind, and they came to a door of stone, muraled with birds in flight, their feathers shown in a multitude of shades of jade.

That mural...hurt, somehow. He didn't know why.

Master touched the anemo symbol that replaced the moon in the mural, and the door opened.

"This will be your room, while you are here. When I sleep, you will be required to remain in the room - the door will seal, and I will place a shield, so that you cannot teleport out. Madame Ping and I hope this will also keep you from sensing any dreams I might have, so you won't be tempted. It is my hope that you will sleep as well during these times."

Xiao's stone prison wafted over into the center of the room and settled, and he tried not to stare around at the room. He'd thought the one in honorable one's subspace had been luxurious, but here...every piece of furniture was exquisitely formed of stone, and another mural of birds in flight took up the space on the wall that would have been a window in the old room. The room was even *larger*, pillars carved into the corners, the bed so large he thought he'd get lost in it...the bed and chairs were cushioned in fabrics of the sorts Master Moharus would have punished him for getting within a dozen feet of.

Why?! *Why* was he being housed in such a place, when he was beyond merely being in disgrace, but surely to be punished, if not executed, and soon...he'd get blood on everything...

His head spun back to face Master just in time to see him yank a scale from a now-draconic arm, and he flinched and cried out in shock.

Why would Master hurt *himself*?!

Master looked up at him and smiled in a manner that...if it had been Bosacius, he would have said the smile was reassuring. But that didn't make sense.

"Do not be concerned, Xiao. My scales are useful for certain enchantments, and I use them frequently. The place it was will heal quickly."

Master then spun some jade out from the wall, and set the scale into it, holding it in his hands and closing his eyes for a moment. Then he walked over to Xiao, and to his shock, his prison dissolved.

He wasn't expecting it, and he'd been held so very still for so long...his legs collapsed as soon as his feet hit the floor, and Xiao crumpled at Master's feet.

"Ah...I apologize. I should have warned you first."

Master knelt down and reached for Xiao's arm, and he had to fight with himself not to scramble backwards, reminding himself over and over that whatever was coming, he deserved it, he shouldn't fight it, shouldn't run...

He managed not to flee, but his eyes squeezed shut and he knew he was shaking. A hand like warm stone grasped his forearm, and he felt something wrap around it, and then the hand pulled away. Xiao didn't move for a long moment, expecting more, expecting *pain*, but nothing happened.

"It is alright, Xiao. Open your eyes and look."

Cautiously, he did as ordered. There was a wide bracelet of jade on his wrist, not so tight as to be uncomfortable, but too tight to slide off. That golden scale from Master's arm was prominently placed in the middle of it.

Jewelry? For a *slave*? Why?

"When that vibrates, you are to return here, to your room. I will remove it when Madame Ping declares you cleared. I thought...I thought that might be more acceptable, less...upsetting, than a necklace, which might appear similar to a collar."

Did Master sound....uncertain?

"Also, should you find yourself in distress, if you press some of your anemo into the scale, I will know, and either come or send someone to help you."

Xiao...was in shock. This made no sense. Why would Master...why would any god...give a slave, a dangerous and unreliable one at that, one due for punishment at the least and probable execution, the means to call on *them* for aid?

His head *hurt*.

Master's feet shifted a bit, and he sighed.

"I suppose...that is all for now. I should try to get back to sleep, or Madame Ping will have my hide...rest well, young Xiao."

The god stepped out, closing the door behind him, and a moment later the walls of the room glowed faintly golden with his power.

That was...it?

He wasn't being punished?

Maybe Master just wanted to be well rested for it, and would see to dealing with him *properly* in the morning...but then why explain rules for this place?

Xiao's head spun, and hurt, and after a moment's hesitation he looked for an unobtrusive corner of the room with a view of the door to wait for morning. He didn't dare sleep, but...with nothing else to do, maybe he could...rest...a little.

Morning

Chapter Notes

TW this chapter: immense guilt, self-hatred, addiction and withdrawal, thoughts of impending death, despair, self harm, more guilt, illness

The rest of the night's 'sleep' was restless at best. How much of it was actually sleep, if any of it, was debatable - Morax slipped in and out of the nightmarish conjurings of his mind, the young adeptus' words echoing in his mind and twined with imagined images of finding the child dead, his wrists slit or strangled by a makeshift noose after Xiao's all-too-evident sense of guilt overwhelmed him...

By the time his mural shifted to indicate dawn outside the subspace, he was beginning to wonder if he should have restrained the child somehow to prevent such things, rather than leaving him loose in a room with so many objects he had not realized, before now, were so potentially dangerous.

Dawn was late enough. Xiao's safety was more important than a little rest, rest he was unlikely to get anyway. Before he was even fully out of bed, the god stretched out his senses. This was his personal subspace; he should be able to sense anything going on within it, any *one* within it - and indeed, within moments he sensed the young adeptus, his presence as strong as ever, clearly awake, and, unfortunately, so full of fear that his presence radiated it.

He'd...have to ask Madame Ping about that, when he went to collect the boy's morning broth. If they were to be living together for the time being, it would hardly be conducive to the child's recovery to continue to be terrified of him. It was no longer merely a matter of his own discomfort with the situation.

For now...he had said Xiao would be free to wander the subspace whenever Morax was awake. Concerns or not, he had given his word. Shifting his focus, he sealed off a couple more areas that could be dangerous to one - inventive - enough, and released the shield on the room he'd given the boy.

He'd be able to find him easily enough on his return anyway...

...still, as he hurried out the passthrough, still neatening his clothing, he placed a shield over the entrance. Best not to risk Xiao trying to leave in a further attempt to provoke him - or simply to flee, given the way he'd felt the child's fear increase dramatically when he'd removed the shield around his room.

Xiao hadn't realized he'd been pulling feathers again until he reached for another and couldn't find

one. He blinked at his fingers. In the dim, colored light the shield cast over the room, his blood looked more black than red. If only it were black in truth...if only it was the evil inside him seeping out, so he would never hurt someone again...

Over and over, he felt his own power, his own winds, slam Bosacius into the wall. Saw his own hand reaching for honorable one's dream. Felt his own face twist into a snarl, the hiss in his throat aimed at *Bosacius*, Bosacius who only ever wanted to *help* him, who he'd never wanted to hurt...his hands reached for feathers again, met only pebbled, scabbed skin coated in the stickiness of still drying blood. So he pulled his knees closer, and wrapped his arms around them, and waited for his punishment, his death.

The sobs had stopped awhile ago, and the weeping with them. He felt empty, like there were no more tears *left* to shed. All that was left was acceptance. Acceptance of his coming death, of the knowledge that he didn't deserve to live, to have another chance. That he was irredeemable. That this was what *must* happen.

What did he want to live for, anyway? Bosacius surely hated him now. Or if he hadn't woken yet, he would hate Xiao once he did and learned the truth of what he'd interrupted. And Bosacius had been...the only brightness in his life. Knowing that someone cared about him, wanted him to be happy, even though he didn't deserve it...but it had been caring bought with a lie, a misunderstanding.

A misunderstanding he knew was there, but was too much of a *coward* to clear up.

Well, Master or honorable one would do that *for* him now, wouldn't they?

He shivered under his excuses for wings, feeling hot and cold and shivering and sweating for both. He didn't know how long it had been - how could he, as far underground as this place *felt*? If he weren't about to be put down anyway, all that stone overhead would make him nervous. His stomach cramped, and his head ached and spun, and he did his best to ignore it. It wouldn't matter soon anyway.

Acceptance. Acceptance was safe, and calming, and...might redeem him, a little, if he didn't fight the end.

Then the shield vanished, and with it the light, and acceptance fled in the face of *terror*.

All of a sudden he remembered he didn't *want* to die.

He especially didn't want to die slowly, in pain, and why would Master wait this long if he was going to make it quick, he must have used the time to prepare something especially nasty, something that properly reflected what he deserved, what he'd earned in all his years of causing pain and destruction and death, his years of cowardice and greed for dreams, for safety that wasn't his, for a freedom he knew was never meant for such as he -

He felt Master approaching and huddled down, prostrating himself, submitting properly even if he couldn't make himself move closer to the door as he should -

- and Master kept going, moving right past the room he'd stashed Xiao in, and...left?

Xiao kept his face to the floor, trembling, but nothing further happened. Master didn't come back.

And the utter darkness was...soothing, somehow.

He fell back into acceptance, and waited.

Madame Ping gave up on sleep well before dawn. Once the situation had been dealt with, and the reality of what had almost happened had a chance to sink in...she'd had dangerous patients before. She'd never been actively afraid of one before. Much less a *child*.

Unfortunately, child or not, the young adeptus had extremely dangerous capabilities that she had...failed to account for properly. And on top of that, she had leaned too much on Bosacius, letting him do the majority of the real work, just because she was afraid of hurting the child again...and because of that, because she hadn't kept on top of the child's condition, she'd missed the signs of his addiction. Bosacius wouldn't know what he was looking at, but if she'd really bothered to look, *she* would have. And if they'd - if *she'd* - caught things earlier, it might not have gone so wrong...

And so she knew her resulting fear was her own doing. A healer should never punish a patient for her own mistakes; making the mistake was bad enough in itself. Yet every time she closed her eyes she saw him leaning over her, that dreadful look on his face, and her imagination kept supplying details that weren't there, such as how it would feel to have her dreams, possibly her soul, *pulled out* and eaten away.

She...wasn't sure she'd be able to bear the vulnerability of sleep in the same subspace with someone who could do that. Not for a long time, if ever. But that wasn't fair to Xiao. He'd only come close in the extremes of a withdrawal that *she'd* failed to diagnose in time, and, logically, she knew he'd be a danger no longer once the detoxification of his system was complete. She couldn't expect her lord to house him longer than that, and if she refused him here, what did that leave? Back to that tiny prison subspace? That would be cruel.

Groaning, she got out of bed and headed for the kitchen. She'd work on her fears. She wouldn't let them hold back her patient, when she'd failed him so much already. And in the meantime, she could at least try to come up with something to ease his symptoms.

She didn't comment on the hour, or the implied lack of rest, when Morax joined her barely past dawn. She suspected he'd had as much trouble sleeping as she'd had, if for different reasons. Instead, she just nodded to him, and waved a hand at the table.

"If you'll take a seat, the new variant of the broth for Xiao should be ready in a few minutes. I'm hoping this will be easier on his system...nausea is often a symptom of withdrawal, and it might be why he's had such a hard time adjusting to food. How did things go?"

The dragon took the offered seat with a deep sigh.

“Not well. I tried to be gentle, but...he was terrified of me before, and I think last night made it worse.”

Madame Ping paused in her stirring for a moment, closing her eyes, then resumed her cooking.

“I don’t think that could be helped, unfortunately. Hopefully living together will give the two of you the chance to work on that.”

For awhile, neither of them spoke, each lost in their own thoughts.

“Madame Ping...is confining him to my subspace, and at night to his room, sufficient? Should I be restraining him more thoroughly?”

There was a clatter as she dropped the colander she’d just pulled out of the cupboard onto the counter, and the healer whipped around to face him.

“Absolutely *not!* If he’s terrified *now*, that might well break him! Why under the *stars* would you consider such a thing?!”

Morax refused to meet her eyes, and she scowled.

“Well?!”

“Last night...he kept screaming for me to kill him. I was worried...that he might seek to do it himself, since I will not.”

Ah. That...actually made sense, even if the old dragon was, as usual, coming to the wrong conclusions. How he could live so long, remember *everything*, and still somehow be oblivious to how people worked was a mystery to her.

“That was under the prompting of an emotional crisis prompted by, if I’m right, extreme addiction in similarly extreme withdrawal, with the substance he craved and despised himself for literally just snatched out of his grasp. The fact that he was trying to provoke *you* into killing him might be a sign he is unlikely to kill himself by his own hands - but you are right in that a close eye should be kept on him. But *not* restraints, Morax! Can you imagine the memories and imaginings that could conjure up, with his past and in his state?!”

“Then what do I do? I can think of no combination of us that can be with him at all times - and I do not want you with him without Bosacius or one of the generals, for the time being. They can summon me immediately if something goes wrong. And while when I am in the subspace it is simple enough to track his location and general state, I am not so much of a healer that I can track his physical condition at a distance - by the time I discovered something had gone wrong, it would likely be too late. I am contracted to protect him, Madame Ping, but how do I protect him from himself?”

That was a difficult question. In the long term, if he was determined to end his life, she knew it might not be possible, or not possible without making his life even more unbearable. In the short term...if she was right, and this was a withdrawal symptom...

“There is an enchantment healers sometimes use, when we have too many patients to give each the level of attention and observation they observe. It can be placed on an object to be worn by a patient, and if the patient’s health has a sudden decline, or dips below a certain threshold, it will alert the healer. It would still probably be best, at least at first, for someone else to be present when you aren’t home, if you can accept the invasion of privacy - “

Morax visibly perked up.

“Of course, so long as it is one of the leading yaksha, or you with one of them, I have no objection - can this enchantment be placed on an item that is already enchanted? I gave him a cuff bracelet meant to signal him when he is to return to his chamber, and to allow him to signal for my aid should he need it...though I doubt he will do so...”

“That sounds like an enchantment that would tie in perfectly. We can simply set it to use the same alert you would get if he triggered it on purpose. I can add it when I check in on him - do you think he’ll have calmed enough to be reasonable by noon or so? I’d prefer to be here when Bosacius wakes up, he’s going to want explanations...and the really critical thing is to keep Xiao away from dreams, which you are better able to accomplish than I am, clearly.”

“I...Madame Ping, you know I am not skilled at predicting emotions. I have no idea how to calm him down, or how long it will take. I was hoping you had some ideas...”

She sighed. That was...true. But it wasn’t exactly something that could be taught in a single conversation, or he would have learned long since.

Well, she could at least tell him what *not* to do...and hope he didn’t come up with some crazy new way to mess up.

He probably would...

Restraints. Really!

She turned back to the stove and busied herself with straining the broth while she thought. She could at least give him some basic tips, as well...the two would be living with each other for at least a few days. If he could keep from traumatizing him further, at least...the forced withdrawal as his system rid itself of...whatever dreams were made of...would be bad enough.

Once she was sure she’d gotten all the vegetables and seasonings out of the broth, as thoroughly as she could, she set them aside to use in something else later and got down a mug and the tin of tea she’d prepared earlier that morning.

“Try to be understanding. You already know he’s afraid; don’t push him to talk if he isn’t ready. Try to make sure he understands what’s going on. Knowing the child, he’s come to some horribly wrong conclusion about our intentions, *again*. Don’t initiate physical contact if you can help it, but you can offer it if you want. Just don’t force it. Don’t rub his back. Don’t touch his wings, if they’re out. *Don’t* restrain him at all if you can avoid it; if it becomes necessary for a short period, as it was last night, don’t use anything resembling manacles. Some of the injuries to his wrists suggest that bastard held him with them, and you’d trigger flashbacks for sure. Don’t assume that he’s taking what you say the way you mean it; watch for his reactions, he has *very* different definitions for some common terms. *Don’t* say the word ‘play’ in his presence.”

She tried to think. What else was there, that they knew about? She couldn’t think of anything...

“You already know to try to be calm around him...you should try to move slowly and predictably as well. Spending time within his sight, but not interacting with him, and being as unthreatening as possible, might help him to relax around you. Bosacius often juggles when he’s doing that, for a new child he’s helping, but I doubt that’s something you know how to do. Maybe it’ll give you ideas.”

She was...just blathering now. Madame Ping heaved a deep sigh, filling the mug with broth and

bringing it and the tea tin over to Morax, who somehow looked both affronted and like he was searching for meaning in her every word.

“I know you mean well. Try to show it. Here’s his morning broth, and a medicinal tea I hope will help with his symptoms. No more than six cups a day, spread as evenly through his waking period as possible.”

She gave the overwhelmed god a long look, and remembered one more thing.

“Also...when he is stressed, Xiao tends to...pull out his feathers. The bird adepti said it’s a common stress reaction, and called plucking. Don’t comment on it or interfere with it, but if he seems to be bleeding too much, send for me. Bloody feathers on the floor are...expected, in these circumstances. Pools and splatters of additional blood, or wings still dripping with it, are not. If it’s just a few drops, or a splatter or two, and his wings are hidden - if you can get him to let you look at them, so you can see if they’re still bleeding, all well and good and that might save some time and worry, but *don’t push it*. The child has rather severe trauma associated with gods showing interest in his wings.”

Morax nodded.

“Is there anything else I should know?”

“...not that I can think of right now. I will be up later, regardless, once Bosacius is awake and filled in. He’ll probably insist on accompanying me, and he’ll undoubtedly be a huge help calming Xiao down if you haven’t managed it by then.”

“I see. Thank you. I should get back before he has been alone and unwatched too long...”

Morax stood and picked up the mug and tin, then hesitated.

“Are *you* alright, Madame Ping?”

She forced herself to smile.

“Of course. I wasn’t hurt, after all. Go on, see to the child.”

To her relief, he didn’t question her words, just nodding again and leaving. Sometimes, she found herself glad he was such a blockhead.

When Morax entered his subspace, he immediately stretched out his senses for the young adeptus. Xiao...didn’t seem to have moved.

Why hadn’t he moved?

Surely he wanted to know more about his new surroundings, to explore?

Nevermind. He could always ask later. He suspected that many things about Xiao were going to be

confusing him, above and beyond the usual. At least he had some hints to start with, now, for all those hints worried and confused him further. The child *harmed himself, pulled out his own feathers*, and he wasn't supposed to *react*? Why not? Shouldn't that sort of thing be *prevented*? But Madame Ping was the healer, and she said not to....

He hesitated outside Xiao's door, calming himself. Or trying to. It was not like him to be this nervous, this hesitant. But then, it was not a normal situation, for him. All his power, all his authority, all his millennia of collected experience and his martial prowess, all were useless or outright detriments now, except for the sole ability to keep the child contained away from dreams.

Morax decided that he did *not* like the feeling.

Still, the young adeptus must be feeling worse.

With a deep breath, and the fervent hope that he wasn't about to make things harder on the child, he pressed the trigger and opened the door - to utter darkness.

He could sense things just fine, of course. Even if it weren't his own subspace, the room and most of the furniture were stone. He could feel where it was warmed by Xiao's presence, the faintest vibrations of a too-rapid heartbeat echoing through the floor, details he hardly paid attention to normally in a world filled with light. But Xiao did not wield geo, and surely the blindness was disconcerting...

Oh. He....hadn't told him how to use the lights, had he. Or attuned them to anemo for him...or shown him how to use the door...

Morax felt like an idiot.

He laid a hand on one of the half-pillars framing the door, and sent a pulse of geo through it, carefully focusing on the light level he wanted. He remembered when Azhdaha had first experienced light - best to keep things a little dimmer than usual, at first, if the child had been waiting in such complete darkness for hours.

Turning towards the corner where he felt Xiao waiting, he couldn't repress a sigh when he saw nothing but the child's back and hair. Hiding behind the bed *and* prostrating himself again...terrified indeed. How to set this to rights...

"I apologize, I should have shown you how to use the lights before I left you here. Were you able to sleep?"

Silence for a long moment, and the bent back seemed to dip even lower.

"Master has no need to apologize to this wretched one."

Xiao's voice was shaking...what was it about an *apology* that made him fearful?

"Nevertheless, I feel I wronged you with that carelessness, so apologize I shall. There is no need to abase yourself in such a way, Xiao. Here, I brought you your morning broth. Why don't you drink it, and then we can talk, and you can ask any questions you might have?"

Minding Madame Ping's words, he walked slowly and carefully to the bed, and set the broth down in front of the opening between furniture and wall. He hesitated a moment, then backed away to a chair on the far side of the room. Perhaps it would be best to give the child as much space as possible.

It was a good few minutes before Xiao moved, but Morax was of geo, of stone. Waiting, he could do. The child slowly sat up, eyes flicking towards him, before he crawled forward to kneel in front of the mug.

Disconcertingly, the boy was shaking so hard he had no trouble seeing it from here. And...he was pale, and sweating. Was this normal? He would have to ask Madame Ping about what symptoms he should expect, when she came by later. Why had he not earlier? *He* had no experience with addictions and their recoveries...

Xiao stared at the mug for another few minutes, before picking it up with a hand that shook so much Morax worried he'd spill.

"M-master, this lowly one w-will obey, will d-drink as ordered, b-but...may this one ask a question, f-first?"

Ordered? He had offered a suggestion, not ordered...no, one thing at a time. That could be dealt with later.

"Of course. You may ask me whatever you like."

The young adeptus swallowed hard, and took a moment before he spoke again.

"I-is the addiction in the broth?"

Morax blinked. He...wasn't sure how to parse that...how did that sentence even make *sense*?

"I am not sure what you mean. Your addiction is to dreams, is it not?"

And now the boy looked as confused as *he* was. At least that confusion seemed to be distracting him from his fear...

"I-isn't addiction what Master was going to poison this traitorous one with, as punishment?"

Poison? Punishment?

Oh. Was it possible the child did not know what an addiction *was*? Much less that he suffered from one? That...put the night before into a different perspective. If he thought the addiction was simply a part of himself...

"No, Xiao. I am not intending to poison you, or punish you for last night. You did not, in the end, break the contract, and from what Madame Ping has said, your actions were not entirely under your control."

The boy seemed to shrink in on himself, and Morax floundered. What had he said wrong?

How would Madame Ping explain this?

"Addiction is.....an ailment, not a poison. An ailment that results from...too much exposure to a substance that one's body begins to depend on, even though it is often not good for the one so exposed. When that substance is taken away, after a time the body begins to crave it, and might have trouble functioning without it...I am not too clear on the details, Madame Ping is better at this..."

He stared helplessly at the shaking child that was now radiating intense guilt along with his confusion and fear. How did he fix this?

Xiao crouched before him once more, not quite prostrating himself after what Morax had said earlier, but close.

“Th-this monstrous one has not, to its knowledge, been exposed to any...substances. Nor was this horrid, d-disgusting *thing* controlled by another. This untrustworthy, *despicable* one’s actions are its own doing. This one kn-knows p-punishment is due, and only p-pleads that M-master not keep it in ignorance as to wh-what it m-might be.”

*‘What...no, how do I...why would he **think** of himself in such a way...I... GuizhongI need you so much right now...’*

Morax sat there in stunned silence for a long moment, trying to process the child’s words, trying to think past them to how to *help* him, how to convince him that it truly was alright, that he wasn’t going to be hurt, or poisoned or...

Abruptly, he realized Xiao was sobbing quietly where he crouched, and trying to hide it.

He had to say something, he couldn’t leave the child in suspense...

“Xiao, I... *you are **not** being punished*. The substance you were addicted to was *dreams*. Madame Ping says that is why you acted as you did, and she would know. I am not angry with you. Neither is she. We are *worried* for you, and want to *help* you...”

Xiao only sobbed harder, curling in on himself more.

What should he *say*?

It felt...wrong, to stay sitting here in this chair, like he was sitting in judgement over the boy.

Morax stood and walked over to the foot of the bed, kneeling a few feet in front of the child.

‘No physical contact...remember...’

He drew back the hand he’d instinctively reached out.

“Xiao, I do not lie. *You will not be punished for your actions last night*. I contracted to protect you, and see you healed...if anything, *I* failed you, by not seeing that you had this ailment, and by not seeing that for a time, you would need protecting from - from what it might prompt you to do. You are not a monster, or a traitor, or...this is just another thing Moharus forced on you. It is not your fault.”

‘Please believe me...I don’t know what to do...’

Bosacius Intervenes

Chapter Notes

...I'm starting to think I should apologize for the whole arc. But for now, I apologize for this chapter again. It reportedly makes this the first fanfic to have made my first reader cry. You have been warned.

TW for this chapter: head trauma aftereffects, self hatred, internal depersonalization, addiction, withdrawal, death idealization

His first thought was to wonder why his head hurt.

His second was that *Xiao was missing*.

Bosacius snapped upright, ignoring the way his head spun as he frantically spread out his senses, trying to find his little whirlwind. It was hard to focus...

Xiao wasn't here.

Or at least, not in his range. There were a few corners of the subspace that -

Suddenly he realized he wasn't in Xiao's room -

- and Madame Ping was trying to push him back, and trying to talk to him.

"...alright, Bosacius. Please lie down. Everything is alright, I'll explain what happened once you let me check you over."

Right. He must have hit his head. That would be why it hurt. Madame Ping wouldn't lie to him. The sooner he cooperated, the sooner he could find out *what he couldn't remember*.

Because the last thing he remembered was waking up and realizing Xiao wasn't there, and that didn't make sense.

"You hit your head pretty hard, and while I was there and able to reduce the swelling almost immediately, you know the drill. What's my name?"

"Madame Ping."

"Yours?"

"Bosacius."

"Who do you - "

"I serve Morax, my head hurts and spins but feels otherwise fine, and the last thing I remember is waking up to find Xiao missing from his bed. Now, *please*, how long ago was that and what happened? Is Xiao alright? Why isn't he here?"

"That was several hours ago."

Frustratingly, she didn't say anything more immediately, staring into his eyes for a long moment before taking her hand off his chest and leaning back with a sigh.

"You can sit up now. *Slowly*. The dizziness might come and go for a couple days, the pain will likely last about the same amount of time. If you experience any other symptoms - "

"Then I will tell you. Now, where is Xiao? And why don't you want to tell me? What don't I remember?"

She gave him a stern look, but it...wobbled, and she looked down. Immediately the yaksha's concern rose higher. It took doing to really shake the healer - and while Xiao certainly had a track record of trying...he sat up slowly, and took her hands in his.

"Ping. Please. What happened?"

"Don't worry. You were the only one actually hurt."

"Ping."

She huffed.

"It's complicated, and will take a few minutes to explain, so I wanted to get that out of the way first. Calm down. I'll tell you."

This time *he* huffed, and leaned back against the head of the bed, folding his unoccupied arms across his chest.

"So tell me."

Ping heaved a sigh, and pulled her hands away to wrap around herself defensively.

"I messed up, is what happened. I expected you to watch Xiao for symptoms and report them as a healer would, when you aren't one and wouldn't know what to watch for, and so I didn't check over Xiao as often or thoroughly as I should have this past week. Even when I was reading him to make the sketches...I didn't look beyond where the old damage that needed repairing was. So I missed it. And I shouldn't have."

He wished she would stop dancing around the subject and just *tell him*. Bosacius understood that she was feeling guilty; which of them didn't, where Xiao was concerned? They'd all messed up with him one way or another, except possibly Bonanus and Menogias. And laying blame wasn't telling him *what for*.

"Ping..."

"Xiao is addicted to eating dreams, and in severe withdrawal. I missed it so completely...he wasn't there when you woke up last night because he was...we're pretty sure he was fighting with himself over whether to eat mine. You showed up and interrupted him, I woke up to him standing over me - you thought he was having a flashback, I think. You sounded like you were trying to talk him out of one anyway...but it didn't work, and he lashed out with the winds he'd raised, and flung you into the wall. Morax showed up right about then, and contained him."

Xiao, *addicted*? The shivering, the sweating, the way he'd been acting so odd...but Bosacius didn't have any experience with addiction, of course he hadn't recognized it. But if he'd brought his concerns about illness to Ping sooner...

“Xiao was...desperate. And I think he’s been worrying about this, and blaming himself for it, for a long time. When Morax questioned him, he said he had no excuse, made it clear that he’d been about to eat my dream, and screamed at Morax to kill him. Repeatedly. Saish...it’s at least partly the addiction talking, but the child is in a very bad place right now, mentally. And he’s gotten too strong to be held in check by the rest of us. For now, he’s up at Morax’s, and he’ll stay there until it’s completely out of his system...Morax is the only one who can be certain of keeping him contained away from dreams, short of putting him in a prison subspace...”

Morax had many strengths, handling a traumatized child was not one of them. Hopefully he’d be permitted to go up there shortly...Xiao needed someone he *trusted* to explain what was going on...

“You told him what not to do around Xiao?”

“This morning, everything I could think of, yes. The arrangement is not perfect, but...”

Bosacius sighed.

“It is what it is. Xiao seems to have a talent for...”

He wasn’t sure how to phrase it.

“Landing in difficult situations?”

At least Ping was quirkling a small smile at him now.

“Yes. Exactly. How long until I can see him? We both know by now Morax will have said at least one thing the little whirlwind’s misinterpreted horribly. And if he was screaming...that...”

“He’ll probably need you more than he needs *me* to check him over at first, yes. Morax is requiring you or one of the generals accompany me anyway, since the child’s behavior is...less predictable, at the moment, and you have the means to call him immediately if necessary. Stand for me, how’s your balance? If you’re steady, we can go.”

The yaksha nodded, and they both stood. He was a little wobbly at first, but steadied quickly enough. He looked up at Madame Ping to say as much..

...and stopped himself. He’d never seen her look so...uncertain. Ping was a confident woman, sure of her talents and skills and place in life, from her music when she was younger to her healing now - he couldn’t just leave her like that. So he reached out and lifted her chin - when had she gotten that gray streak, by her ear? - to look her in the eyes.

“This isn’t your fault. You’re exhausted, we all are...and we both know Xiao works to hide any weakness he’s feeling. What matters is that we know now, and are going to help him.”

She stared at him for a moment, and he could’ve sworn he saw her eyes grow wet before she pulled away and gave a little half-laugh.

“Thank you. Let’s head on up, and hope Morax hasn’t messed things up too badly, shall we?”

It didn’t take long to reach the familiar cave entrance. As this was a private subspace, though, rather than a semi-public one like Madame Ping’s or the yaksha pavilion, they couldn’t simply

walk in. Yaksha and healer raised their hands in unison, resting them against the entrance shield, and let loose a small pulse of power to identify themselves and request entrance.

Barely a moment later, their hands sunk into the shield as they were allowed inside. They waited; Bosacius knew that Morax's abode was enormous, and there was no telling *where* anyone was inside, for a guest like himself. He'd been here often over the centuries, but he was pretty sure he hadn't even seen half of it.

They weren't kept waiting long. Less than a minute later Morax came into view down the hall, not quite running - and as he got closer, tear tracks were evident on his face.

Immediately Bosacius' thoughts started racing, thinking of all the terrible ways things could have gone wrong - he reminded himself that if Xiao needed immediate medical attention, or was dead, Morax wouldn't have simply stayed here - but *what had happened?* Unconsciously, he broadened his stance, as though readying for battle.

"Bosacius - Ping - I am glad you are here, I don't know what to do, everything I say just seems to make things worse - "

Bosacius swallowed hard. 'Everything he said', not 'everything he did'. That meant it was in *his* area of expertise, as he and Ping had thought it would be.

"Calm down, Morax. Makes what worse? Start at the beginning."

The dragon froze for a moment, then straightened and took a deep breath. It was...disturbing, to see him in such a state. Morax just...he *never* panicked. And he seemed awfully close now.

"When I brought him his broth this morning...Xiao first assured me that he would obey and drink it regardless, then asked if it had 'addiction' in it. He...he thought 'addiction' was a type of poison. I tried...I have tried multiple times to explain since then what addiction is, and that he's not to blame for last night, that he's not about to be punished, but...he alternately huddles in on himself and weeps, and pleads for me to tell him how he's going to be punished, couched in such...horrendous self description that...I don't know what to do. He *genuinely thought* that I had poisoned his broth and was going to *drink it* anyway and I...I don't know how to fix this, fix *him*, I..."

That was...bad. Not completely unexpected for his little whirlwind, unfortunately, but bad. He immediately started thinking on how to approach this, leaving comforting their friend and lord to Ping.

Probably not stories. He...knew that something about the story he'd started to tell in the bath last night had upset Xiao, but he couldn't remember *what*. Probably because of the hit to his head. So it was safer to dodge those for now, probably. It would probably depend on how the kid reacted to seeing him...

"...be alright, Morax. That's why we're here."

"Morax, which room is he in? Is it one I know? I can go ahead and see if...maybe I can calm him down a bit."

"The one prepared for avian adepts. And...I wish you better success than I had..."

"Thank you. Maybe you could take the chance to eat something, if you haven't? From what you said, this might take awhile..."

Morax hesitated, but Madame Ping nodded vigorously.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Come on Morax, where’s your kitchen again? Xiao is in good hands with Saish, you know that, and we should discuss more specifics on how to manage things going forward...”

Bosacius didn’t wait to listen, already walking quickly down the corridor. He slowed as he neared the Bird Room, as he’d always called it. He didn’t want to alarm the kid by rushing in...he pressed the anemo symbol, and braced himself as he stepped in.

As well he did.

Xiao stared at him for a moment in what looked like a mix of disbelief and relief, then his face twisted with guilt and grief and he threw himself forward into a prostrated position. Damn it. He’d really thought the kid was over that, with him at least.

“Little whirlwind, you really don’t need to...”

The child flinched, then spoke quickly, as if he didn’t think he’d be allowed to finish.

“This foul one apologizes for the harm it has caused to mighty one. It knows there is no excuse for its abhorrent actions, and is ready for whatever punishment mighty one might deem fit.”

This time *he* flinched.

If Xiao was reacting like this to *him* ...no wonder Morax was at his wits’ end.

“Xiao...why would I punish you? I know you didn’t want to hurt me, and I’m fine now, anyway.”

The kid just stayed there, trembling. Saish walked over, slowly and carefully, and knelt a few feet in front of him, but along the wall, out of the way of the direct line to the door. This...he wasn’t going to have to start *completely* from scratch, they had a history now, but...it might be close.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Take your time. I’ll just wait here, and you can tell me what’s wrong when you’re ready.”

He knew what was *actually* wrong, of course. Ping had briefly explained the likely psychological effects of the withdrawal on their way up, in simple terms, since this was something he hadn’t dealt with before. But from what Morax had said, Xiao might have a very different view on things, and if he could find out what it was, he’d be better able to help.

The silence dragged on, and his little whirlwind didn’t move. Bosacius casually looked around the room as if he had all the time in the world, while being alert from movement out of the corner of his eye. Watching the kid would probably just make him more nervous, after all. Eventually his gaze wandered in front of himself, to the space between bed and wall, where Xiao had probably hidden earlier -

- bloody feathers. He’d expected *some*, but...this was too many, far too many. Entire *piles* of them...he swallowed hard and tried not to react. Xiao was a mess as is, if he prodded about this it would undoubtedly make things worse, but...was he still bleeding? Would Xiao even let him check, now?

First things first. Calm him. Try to get his trust back. Then...maybe...and if not, he’d make sure Madame Ping knew, at least. Maybe there was something she could do if alerted to the possibility, even without access...not likely, but...at least from what he’d seen before, plucked feathers didn’t bleed *a lot*. At least when it was only a few.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then focused on the mural on the wall as he waited. He couldn't do anything, if Xiao didn't trust him.

The loathsome one couldn't believe it when it felt an all-too-familiar electro presence approaching, instead of Master. Surely he hated it now. Unless they hadn't told the mighty one anything when he woke? But why wouldn't they? Mighty one was in charge of Master's military, and would need to be aware of threats to Master's people, and surely this despicable one counted as such now...

Then the door opened, and it couldn't help staring for a long moment. Mighty one looked...well. He didn't look hurt at all, even though this reprehensible one remembered - it flinched at the memory - remembered throwing mighty one into the wall with great force. And...mighty one was even looking at it with...what looked like *concern*, and his usual gentle kindness...

Kindness it didn't deserve. Any more than it deserved to look upon the face of one so well-regarded.

Guilt and pain twisted in it, merging with the grief it knew was coming. It knew, if the others had not informed mighty one of its crime, it was this wretched one's duty to do so. It could not, should not flee from the penalties for its failures. It flung itself into the properly submissive posture, trying not to tremble too much as it prepared itself.

Maybe...maybe if it brought up the offense personal to mighty one first, he would react with sufficient rage that this monstrous *thing* would not need to recount its further crimes. One could not speak if one were dead.

It would be a mercy this awful one did not deserve, but it could not help hoping for it all the same.

"Little whirlwind, you really don't need to..."

It flinched, both at the inapplicable nickname, and at the warmth in the voice. It didn't deserve it, and knowing that *hurt*. Best to...to get this over with quickly. Then mighty one would hate it as he should and...and this filthy one could return to awaiting...awaiting what it deserved.

"This foul one apologizes for the harm it has caused to mighty one. It knows there is no excuse for its abhorrent actions, and is ready for whatever punishment mighty one might deem fit."

There was silence for a moment, before mighty one spoke.

"Xiao...why would I punish you? I know you didn't want to hurt me, and I'm fine now, anyway."

Xiao...it didn't deserve to be called that, anymore, either. It didn't deserve the protection it implied. The name was a gift from its Master, and as such could not be discarded...but oh, it hurt. As did mighty one's...unreasoning belief in this vile one. It...it was going to have to admit to all of it. It shook harder.

When mighty one's trust in it finally broke...it was going to be terrible. Why did it have to be

present for that dreaded moment?

...because it did not deserve to be spared it.

Mighty one started speaking again, and it jumped as it realized he had moved. Still in front of the terrible one, but against one wall, like...like the day of the first story. It struggled not to weep at the reminder of what they'd had, of that day it had dared to *hope*.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Take your time. I'll just wait here, and you can tell me what's wrong when you're ready."

What was *wrong*? Everything. Nothing. *This* ill-made one was what was wrong, but it had been stopped before it could cause more harm, and surely would be disposed of soon, so all would be well again.

Why did that thought hurt? It was only what was good and right.

It realized it was weeping...of course, it would shame itself further, further prove its ineptitude and uselessness.

...it couldn't make itself speak.

It opened its mouth and closed it, but no words came out, only the quiet sobs it *could not* seem to repress. It bowed further, ground its face into the floor, hoping mighty one wouldn't notice. It truly was incompetent, just as Master Moharus had always said. It couldn't even control itself enough to confess to its wrongdoings, the truth of its despicable being. It let fear control it, like the cowardly thing it was, less control than even a beast. What worth was there to one like it? It could only hope they were merciful enough to make its end quick, when they threw it away.

Mighty one...mighty one seemed merciful. Master insisted on drawing things out, pretending not to realize that it was irrevocably flawed as a tool. Surely mighty one would not do the same?

The wretched one took a truly reprehensible amount of time to regain enough control to speak. Mighty one was generous, and simply waited - but then, mighty one didn't know the truth yet, didn't know how it had repaid his kindness.

It swallowed. Death would be easier to bear than losing mighty one's favor. Even a slow death...probably. But it was inevitable, and inevitable things were always best dealt with quickly. It was only hurting *itself* by drawing this out.

"Mighty one interrupted this traitorous one breaking the contract. It was not in a...flashback, as mighty one seemed to believe. It *knew* it was wrong. It fully intended to consume honorable one's dream anyway. This monstrous one *wanted* to, wanted the sweetness and stolen joy and full stomach and *power*. It still wants to, it hungers for *mighty one's* dreams as well. This vile one is a demon through and through, and must be put down, thrown away, before it can cause more harm. Because it *will*. This despicable, disloyal one cannot stop itself, so it must be stopped by others."

Mighty one wasn't moving, wasn't saying anything. It shook, and shifted to more accurately face him.

"This...this foul thing, though worse than useless, would beg only for the mighty one to be merciful, and end it quickly. It...it does not want to...to have to endure...endure..."

It couldn't find the words. How could it tell the mighty one that it was the knowledge that *he* despised this horrid one that it didn't wish to endure, that it pled mercy from? It would

be...unconscionably presumptuous. It couldn't...

It didn't even register the motion before hands were grabbing it, lifting it, wrapping it in a tight hug. At first it thought it was being grabbed to be dealt with, and went limp, but after a few moments it was clear that wasn't so, and it stiffened and struggled and tried to fight free.

No, this was *wrong*, mighty one was supposed to *destroy* it not *comfort* it! Did he not *understand* that? It hit at mighty one's chest, but had no leverage, so it kicked as hard as it could, but couldn't seem to strike anything, and mighty one was too *strong*, it couldn't get free, and it was crying and crying was *bad* why couldn't it stop...

It was pointless.

There was nothing it could do.

So it finally went limp again, and just hung there in mighty one's arms, weeping against his chest. Shameful. *Despicable*. It didn't deserve this, didn't deserve the hand that was now gently scratching its scalp, didn't deserve to feel soothed and comforted when it was so very *wrong* in every way and always had been.

Why? Why didn't mighty one seem to hate it yet? It didn't make *sense*.

They remained like that for what seemed a very long time, until its tears began to slow. For some reason, it felt so very, very tired...but that didn't matter. Everything was *wrong* and it didn't matter.

The hand on its head stopped its motion, and its body was shifted so that mighty one could see its face. It risked a glance up, and was disturbed to see that mighty one had been crying too. *Why?* It hadn't meant to hurt him. *Mighty one* didn't deserve to be in pain, this awful one did. How could it fix it?

...it couldn't. It was only suited for breaking things, not fixing them.

"You are a person, not a thing, Xiao. You are not a traitor, or a demon, or a monster. No one here will be..putting you down...because you don't deserve it. You deserve a chance to heal and learn what it is to be *happy*."

It opened its mouth to argue, disrespectful though such an action would be, but didn't get any further before a hand clamped over its mouth. For a moment it was tempted to bite. Maybe *then* mighty one would react properly.

"Don't argue. I know you don't believe me yet. I want these words in your head anyway, to combat the ones put there by Moharus and your addiction. *You do deserve better*. Just like the little whirlwind, it's not - "

Biting it was. It chomped down hard, then reared its head back when mighty one cursed and let go in the hopes of maximum speaking time.

"*This one is **nothing** like the little whirlwind!* The little whirlwind had no choice, was being controlled. *But this one **always** had a choice.* This cowardly one could have chosen the pain of punishment instead of eating dreams, *right from the beginning!* But it was too scared, too *weak*, and so it destroyed people, *innocents*, just like it was going to destroy honorable one and even *you* -

“

The hand was back over its mouth again, despite the blood it could feel leaking on its lips. It glared at mighty one through fresh tears. What would it take to make him *understand*?!

“Don’t bite me, Xiao. I am well aware that you think it’s all your fault. I’m going to try to explain why it *isn’t*. ”

He stared into its eyes for a long moment, and it struggled to keep up the glare.

“You have three choices. You can keep trying to bite me, and be gagged for this. You can not bite, but keep trying to interrupt me, in which case my hand stays right where it is. Or you can agree to *listen*, and I’ll let go of your mouth, and even put you down if you want, and you can try to refute me when I’m done. Whatever you pick, I’m starting to think I waited too long for this conversation, so you are *going* to hear what I have to say. Do you understand?”

It managed the glare for a moment longer, before the despicable one faltered and its gaze fell. It nodded.

“Which is it going to be?”

It deserved to be gagged. Especially after...it cringed. But it couldn’t explain to mighty one if it was gagged, and mighty one promised it would have the chance...

“The third.”

“Good. Do you want down?”

It nodded again, and to its surprise - but why was it surprised, *mighty one* wouldn’t lie - it was gently set back on the floor. It promptly fled a few feet away, bracing itself by the foot of the bed before looking back towards the mighty one and waiting.

...why did he look sad?

Mighty one sighed and sat back down before starting to talk.

“From what you have told me, Moharus captured you very young, so young you don’t really remember a ‘before’. I’m guessing he had that controlling structure in you from the start, but even if he didn’t, one so young is easily hurt and controlled, through no fault of their own. That is why we protect our young. And then he...raised you...with the expectation of excruciating pain for every misstep, real or imagined. Anyone would fear that kind of pain, no matter how strong they were, and it would take far less to control the actions of a young child, generally speaking, adeptus or not.”

That didn’t make sense. Pain was to be endured; only the weak and cowardly would use it as an excuse. It opened its mouth, then closed it again. It had promised not to interrupt...

“On top of that, he had the structure, which from what you’ve said could be used to control some of your actions directly. And he had your addiction. I don’t know how old you were when he first made you eat a dream - “

The words triggered the memory, and it shivered. It hadn’t wanted to, it vaguely remembered being told it was a bad thing to do, and bad for one - but it had been hurt again and again until it took a handful of dreamstuff and shoved it into its mouth -

” - but from then, or not long after, he had another tool to control you, because you would have craved the dreams whether you wanted them or not. That’s not you that wants them, it’s the addiction - your body has grown so used to dreams it leaned on them like a crutch, and that crutch has been yanked away. That’s why you’ve been feeling so bad. It makes your brain lie to you too, finding every bad thought and amplifying it, making you feel like garbage until the only good thing in life seems to be the dreams you could eat. That’s not you. The *addiction* is like the fire that controlled the whirlwind - except it’s been inside you for so long you don’t know how to tell it apart from yourself anymore.”

It all sounded like a fine lot of excuses, but excuses were worthless. What mattered was that it *had* done those things, and it’d had other options. Not pleasant ones, but what was one thing’s comfort against a person’s life? A hundred lives, a thousand? More?

...just how many had it killed or destroyed while it served Master Moharus? It realized it didn’t know, and that knowledge left a deep, acidic pit in its stomach. It shivered again and crouched down, not really feeling like standing anymore.

“The fact you were able to hold onto any real sense of self, any will to resist at all, after so long in those conditions is beyond impressive, Xiao. You are incredibly strong and courageous. I know...you won’t believe me on a lot of this just yet. But it’s true, and you need to hear it, so the words, the knowledge, are there to use to fight the thoughts that addiction is putting in your head. The thoughts and habits that Moharus ground into you. *You are worth something*. You are valuable in and of yourself, as a *person*, above and beyond whatever skills you might have.”

He was right. It didn’t believe him. Those words might apply to a person, but it was a slave, a possession, a broken weapon, a thing. The same standards didn’t apply, and it had known this a very, very long time.

“You *matter*, Xiao. You matter to me, and Madame Ping, and Morax. You matter to Indarias, Menogias, and Bonanus too, for all they haven’t had much chance to interact with you yet. We all *care* about you, and want to see you heal, see you learn how to be happy and that it’s alright not to be perfect. We see the fire trying to control you, even if you can’t yet. And we’re trying to help you put it out, without losing *you* too, because you’d leave holes behind if you were gone. Even if you can’t believe me yet, can you let us try? Can you listen to us, and do what we ask, and... *not* try to end yourself, or try to get us to, and trust us to not let your addiction hurt us, now that we know what’s going on?”

Mighty one...wasn’t going to let this go, was he. And Master...hadn’t wanted to deal with him properly either. It would be...easier, to go along with them, for now. Let them convince themselves they’d done what they could.

It would be easier, but easier wasn’t *right*, as it knew all too well. *Right* was very hard, and hurt, and was usually punished, but felt better in the end. It...didn’t manage to choose right often.

It...would like to do so more often.

And it was *right* for this monster to be stopped before it harmed others, *right* to make sure mighty one and the others knew the truth, even if it hurt this one, even if it would never recover from knowing they hated it.

It swallowed, and bit its lip, and summoned its wings. It spread them as wide and menacingly as it could, and glared at mighty one.

“How can mighty one look at this thing and not see a monster? How can mighty one know what

*this one has **done*** and not see a demon? How can mighty one *know* that it *still* wants to destroy people, whatever the reason, and not see a rabid *dog* that needs to be put down before it hurts *anyone else?*”

It couldn't help a sob, and to its shame, the rest came out as a strained whisper with its gaze on the floor.

“How can you not be afraid, not *hate* me, after what I did to you and tried to do to your friend?”

There was silence, then a shuffling sound, and suddenly it realized mighty one was kneeling in front of it, and it was enveloped in a gentle hug. It didn't fight this time, just waited anxiously for the damning words it knew must be coming.

“Because I see the little brother I never had.”

Learning and Trying

Chapter Notes

If you need a fluff break before plunging back into Xiao's mind, I *did* write a fluff oneshot between chapters, An Unusual Statue. It features many of the same characters, right after the end of the Archon War.

TW: internal depersonalization, severe depression and guilt, vomiting, withdrawal, addiction, slavery, painful discussions, blockheadedness

'Little brother'?

It didn't understand.

It knew what the words meant, theoretically. It had seen enough people throwing themselves in its way, dying to try to protect their kin. But it didn't understand *why*, had never understood why.

All it understood was that it was somehow hurting the mighty one, and it didn't want to.

"This wretched one doesn't understand."

The hug tightened for a moment, then it felt one of mighty one's hands move to its head and begin stroking its hair.

"What don't you understand?"

Everything. Why he didn't hate it, what seeing it as a little brother had to do with it, *why* he saw it that way, what that even meant, what did he expect of it now? How could it fix things, so mighty one would 'see' it accurately? But it wasn't sure how to express all that...

"What does it mean, that you see this disloyal one as a 'little brother'?"

Mighty one's hand stuttered on its head, then resumed moving.

"Do you remember when I told you that some people hurt when they see others hurt? Who can't help but try to help those that don't deserve to be hurt?"

It nodded. But that didn't apply, except to explain mighty one's strange actions; it *did* deserve to hurt, and mighty one should *know* that now.

"In the same way, but more so, people hurt when those they call family hurt. People love and care about their kin, share in their joys and sorrows. I might not have known you long, litt - Xiao, but you were tucked away in a corner of my heart almost from the start. It doesn't matter what you've done or almost done. I know your heart, and you are *good*. Whether you feel the same way or not, now or ever, you are my little brother, and I love you, and don't want to see you hurt, and *that's not going to change*."

It swallowed, and swallowed again. Suddenly, it was having trouble thinking at all. It was hot and cold and nothing made sense.

It didn't want mighty one to hurt. Was that the same thing?

It didn't matter. It was all based on a wrong premise. This awful one wasn't *good*, and this...caring thing...seemed to have blinded mighty one.

But hadn't it already told him everything?

Bile rose in its throat, and it swayed as it swallowed again and again, trying to keep the broth from earlier down. There wasn't anything to vomit in, here, and it mustn't make a mess.

It was going to hurt mighty one again. It didn't want to, but it was going to. Because mighty one was wrong about it, it deserved pain, it didn't deserve to live, it was *bad* and when that caught up with it properly it was going to hurt mighty one too and mighty one *didn't* deserve to be hurt...

It couldn't stop the tears, and had to clap a hand over its mouth to try to stop the vomit.

This was wrong. Everything was *wrong* and it didn't know how to make it *right*...

A hand wasn't enough. It backed up and mighty one let go, looking incredibly sad, but it hardly noticed as it frantically looked around for a safe place, *any* place to vomit before it -

Its body spasmed and it ruthlessly tightened its throat trying to keep it back, but some landed in its hand anyway -

There weren't any good options. It ran for the corner and bent over, unable to keep it back anymore. Unable to keep *anything* back; it vomited and wept shamefully, its weakness on display for anyone to see. But the only one to see was mighty one, who said, who said...

This was wrong. It knew it was wrong.

But some small part of it had felt a warm glow, listening to those words.

A part of Bosacius was hurt, he had to admit, but it was very quickly clear *why* Xiao had pulled away only moments later. The kid's stomach seemed tender at the best of times, and Ping had said that nausea was a common withdrawal symptom. He should've expected that intense emotion would make that even worse...and why hadn't Morax given the kid a waste bin?

The yaksha stood and walked over to hold Xiao's braid out of the way - more awkward than the night before - so recent? It felt longer - with his wings out, since he had to bend over and stretch, but the poor kid was clearly upset enough to be vomiting at all, there was no need to add to his embarrassment by letting it get in his hair. Hair that he was always so particular about keeping perfectly neat...one of these days he'd have to find out why.

It didn't take as long as he'd feared for the kid to stop heaving, and once he did, Bosacius guided him back to sit on the bed and rubbed his shoulder, hoping it helped some. At least...at least Xiao wasn't flinching away now, even if he was still crying.

“This unworthy one is sorry...”

Bosacius shook his head.

“You don’t need to apologize for being sick, Xiao.”

“Not...not that...”

He waited, still rubbing slow circles on the kid’s shoulder, while Xiao visibly worked up the nerve to speak.

“Mighty one is...is going to be hurt again, because of this...this flawed one. It doesn’t want that, but...mighty one says...says he hurts for it...and...and this one needs to do the right thing, and mighty one is *wrong*, this despicable one *isn’t* good, it’s bad and wrong and so doing the right thing means accepting that it deserves punishment and pain and...and not living anymore...but mighty one says that would hurt *him* and mighty one *doesn’t* deserve that and so it would be *better* if mighty one didn’t care about this foul thing, if mighty one despised it as it deserves, e-even though it...it appreciates the gesture, and d-doesn’t *want* to be hated it knows it *deserves* it and it is *right* that it hurt even though it’s hard because *right* is always hard...”

Xiao’s tears started to fall more heavily by halfway through his little speech, and he broke down in sobs at the end, and Bosacius couldn’t hold back anymore. The kid needed to get the thoughts out, but this *hurt* so much, for both of them...he pulled Xiao into his lap where he could hold him more easily, and - a little awkwardly to avoid touching his wings, which thankfully, were *not* currently bleeding - held him close, rocking slightly in what he hoped would be interpreted as a soothing motion.

“If pain is the cost of having you in my life, Xiao, so be it. It’s worth it. And you just *proved* you’re good.”

He raised one hand to skritch at the boy’s scalp again, waiting for the inevitable question.

“How?”

“Someone who was *bad* and *wrong* wouldn’t care what was right. Only a good person would be willing to endure so much, to try to do the right thing, to pay for what they believed themselves to have done wrong.”

It took awhile for Xiao to think over the words, but that was alright. It was probably hard for him to think at all, right now, and at least he seemed to be calming down...if slowly, and in fits and starts. Bosacius just hoped at least some of this would *hold* while he was gone...he *could not* delay his more wide-ranging duties past today, not with Sinaria not yet dealt with, and it had been made clear that he would not be permitted to stay the night anymore, for obvious reasons. Xiao *needed* the tools to get by without him, at least for a couple days...and stars, he *hoped* Morax didn’t undo all his efforts while he was gone. He wouldn’t do it on purpose, but the dragon lacked...experience in these situations, and tended to have a hard time picturing others as thinking *differently* from himself. He and Xiao were like clouds threatening to merge into a furious storm...

“But how can this vile one be good, if it *wants* to destroy others?”

“Because it’s the addiction that wants that, not you.”

He could already feeling the kid stiffening in protest...he must not be convinced the addiction was real yet. How to prove it to him...a few days, a couple weeks maybe, would be proof enough. He’d pass the peak and as his body finally cleansed itself the cravings would lessen, though Ping said

they might never go away entirely. But how to show him *now*...

“Does eating dreams make you happy?”

Xiao shook his head violently.

“Does killing and slaughtering innocents, bringing others pain, bring *you* joy?”

“No!”

“If you were truly *bad*, it would. It is enjoyment of such things that shows a person to be evil, or at the very least a complete disregard for whether their actions cause those results. But *you* clearly care a great deal when you believe others have been hurt by you, don’t you?”

A shaky nod.

“But...this one wants to hurt them anyway. That...that can’t be good, can it?”

“If hurting people doesn’t bring you happiness, why do you think *you* want to do it?”

That seemed to stump him for a long moment, and the young adeptus opened and closed his mouth several times as though looking for the right words. Bosacius waited patiently, keeping up the comforting motions. Hopefully, he’d led Xiao’s thoughts in the right direction - to the idea that the addiction was something *in* him, but not a *part* of him.

“This one...would like to believe mighty one is right. That it isn’t this one’s fault, that there’s...something else, inside this one controlling things. That...that this one might be...be good. It would be...so easy...but...what’s *right* is never easy, and only feels good *after*, so how could that be right? This...this unworthy one should, *must* take responsibility for its actions. To do otherwise would be... *wrong*, and cowardly, and selfish.”

Bosacius couldn’t help a small smile. Progress. If the little whirlwind *wanted* to believe him, he had his foot in the door.

“You’re right that doing what one *should* often isn’t easy. But it’s not always the hardest path either, Xiao. You can’t use difficulty alone as a metric for determining the right thing to do, because sometimes the right thing is also something that happens to make things easier for you, too. You’re also right that you should own up to your actions - but you’ve done that already, haven’t you? You’ve made sure that I know what happened. You’ve put a lot of effort into making sure we’re all aware that you believe you deserve harsh punishment for it.”

Xiao didn’t respond, but he seemed to be listening. Good.

“So how about another measure for how to act? You’re concerned that others will be hurt if you aren’t...dealt with. So. If you’re right, and it’s some inescapable part of your internal makeup that’s making you crave dreams, then yes, you are a danger, but there are other means than killing you that can mitigate that. And if you were killed, it would not only hurt you, but me, and Madame Ping, and Lord Morax, and Bonanus, and Menogias, and Indarias - who still blames herself for scaring you, by the way. That’s something you won’t be able to work out with her if you’re dead.

If, on the other hand, the rest of us are right, and this need for dreams comes from an addiction - a sickness, if you will - then if you died, it would be for nothing. We would all be hurt and you wouldn’t have saved anyone. I can see how it would be hard to see which is correct, from this moment - there’s not enough information. But Morax has you well contained for now, so you can’t hurt anyone either way. So why not hold off until you *do* have the information to know what the

right thing is? Just until Madame Ping declares your system clear of the addiction. A few days, maybe a couple weeks. Let us take care of you for that long, and if you *still* feel you can't keep from eating dreams, we can discuss what to do about it then. How about it?"

He waited, heart in his throat. It was essentially the same thing he'd asked earlier, but maybe now...

"....alright."

Bosacius let loose a sigh of relief, and held the kid tighter for a moment.

"*Thank you.* Thank you for giving us a chance."

He felt confusion swirling from the kid's now overwhelming presence, but Xiao didn't ask anything.

"Now, I believe Madame Ping might have sent over some special tea that might help you feel better for now. Why don't we go to Morax's kitchen and track it down?"

Xiao shifted in his lap.

"Is it allowed?"

"I would think so. If nothing else, I'll be with you, and I'm one of your designated escorts, remember?"

The kid fidgeted some more, and nodded. Bosacius let him down, and the kid, unfortunately, promptly hid his wings away again. He'd hoped Madame Ping could get a look... 'not bleeding' didn't mean 'doesn't need healing', and there was rather a lot of *dried* blood on his underwings. But one thing at a time.

He really needed to ask her about Xiao's power levels, too. His presence was stronger even than him now, and the way the kid was burning up...fever was one of the withdrawal symptoms she'd listed, but he was still worried. That structure had mucked about with his little whirlwind's adeptal energy for who knew how long - what if it had broken something in him, and they hadn't noticed earlier?

One thing at a time. he walked over to the door, and as he pressed the anemo symbol on this side, he noticed Xiao's too-strong presence focused intently on what he was doing.

...that *blockhead*.

"Did Morax not explain how doors work here?"

Xiao shook his head as they started down the hall.

"He didn't like the way doorknobs interfered with the murals. So every door has an elemental symbol on it somewhere. Press that, and it'll open, unless it's sealed."

The kid nodded, and Bosacius sighed. It looked like he'd need to have a long discussion with Morax before he left...find out what else he'd forgotten to tell Xiao, and reiterate how to treat him.

The dragon *meant* well. He knew he did. But he couldn't help but worry...

He couldn't stop pacing. He wanted to *fight* something, but there was nothing *to* fight. The enemy in this situation was Moharus and he was already *dead*, by his own hand. Xiao was *hurting* and he couldn't challenge what was hurting him to battle and...he gripped the hair behind his horns in tight fists, and kept pacing.

Calm. He had to be calm. He'd scare the child. Why was it so hard to be stars-damned *calm*!

"Morax."

He as a protector, a guardian, not a *caretaker*. He was never meant to deal with people, much less children, much less traumatized, *suicidal*, ex-slave children! He'd never meant to rule. He was a *dragon*, one of the most solitary species in existence! What was he doing here? Why did he keep making contracts that forced him to deal with *people* and all the emotions that came with them and ran through his fingers like sand when he tried to comprehend...

"*Morax.*"

He whirled with a snarl, fangs elongating as his form instinctively began to shift for combat.

"What!"

Madame Ping didn't move, just giving him a steady look.

"I'm here now. Bosacius is helping Xiao. *Talk to me.*"

He growled and turned away, struggling to hold onto his form.

"What is there to talk about? Guizhong was supposed to be here for these things. I'm not *suited* for this, I never have been, I should never have agreed to lead our people..."

"Morax."

"**WHAT!**"

His friend raised an eyebrow, and he found he couldn't meet her eyes. He shouldn't yell at her. This was not her fault.

"Sit down. Please. You're just working yourself up further."

He huffed and formed himself a chair of stone by the counter.

"I would remind you that you agreed, despite your reservations, because it was the only way to *protect* our people. And you have done a very good job of it since, in part because you are *aware* of your limitations and delegate the tasks you aren't suited for, where possible. It's not your fault that this task happens to be both one only you can do, and one you don't know how to deal with. So *talk to me*. How can we help?"

Slamming his head into some nice, solid stone would not help. Morax reminded himself of this a few times before he responded.

“I. Do. Not. *Know*. I spent the morning trying to reassure him. I did not touch him. I did not use the word ‘play’. I told him over and over that he was not being punished, that we knew he was just ill, explained what you told me about addictions repeatedly. As far as I can tell it only made things worse. He seemed to swing from terror to despair and back repeatedly, and *still* expected me to kill him, and *I don’t even know what I’m doing wrong!*”

He could not stay in the chair. It was too confining. He rose and began pacing the room again.

He should make it larger. Why had he made a kitchen too small for his true form to pace? This was *his* home. There was no real need for everything to be sized for humans.

“Morax. Sit down.”

He growled and kept pacing. Sitting did not help. He wasn’t sure what had happened to his ability to wait patiently, but it had utterly fled at the moment. He craved flesh beneath his claws, the dying screams of those who *dared* hurt what was his...

“Morax, when we’re done talking you can go make yourself a cave and rip apart a few hundred stone effigies of Moharus if you’d like, but for now, *sit down*. You’ll be alone in here with Xiao all night, and likely most of the time for awhile, and we need to sort out the best way to handle this if things were as bad as you thought this morning. So *please*.”

...she was right. He could not let his temper get in the way of helping the young adeptus. That would be against the spirit of his contract, if not the word of it. There was no one left to delegate. He had to care for the boy properly.

He couldn’t seem to stop growling, but he managed to pitch it too low for most beings to hear. That would have to be sufficient.

He sat.

“Do you have ideas, then?”

Ping sighed, and he smothered the urge to snarl at her again.

“Your relationship with the child is not, and will never be, the same sort of relationship as he has with Saish, or me, or anyone else. He currently thinks of you as his master, and even if he chooses to stay once this contract is done, he will likely always see you as some sort of authority figure. And...we should really have taken into account that you are a very different person, with a very different approach to most things, than me or Saish. We gave you the same sort of advice we would give a new healer-in-training in dealing with this sort of situation, instead of advice tailored to you, and your unique relationship with Xiao.”

Morax’s head hurt. He formed a pillar to rest it on.

“And all that means...?”

“Attempts to get on his level, or in any way imply you are equal or below him, will likely make him very uncomfortable or even frightened, coming from you. He *expects* you to give him orders, and not put up with his lack of cooperation. As...counterintuitive as it might be, in your specific case...perhaps be sterner with him? Instead of trying to comfort him in the usual way, if he’s upset, take him into another environment you think he’ll enjoy. Show him things. Perhaps give him some small task to perform, since Bosacius has commented that he’s been uncomfortable with having nothing to do.”

So, essentially the *opposite* of what he'd been trying that morning.

"Would that not make his fear worse, being dragged around all over the place?"

"I'm not suggesting you physically grab him, Morax! I doubt you'd need to. Just tell him to follow you."

"Ah."

He considered. There were a number of places in his abode that he had not shown to anyone in...a very long time. Crystal gardens, the enormous murals he added to from time to time, hidden underground grottos with glowing stones on the ceiling like stars in the sky...Xiao was a bird of some sort, perhaps if he could get them to open up enough, he could form a section of the subspace to open to the sky, and encourage the young adeptus to help him design it...

His musings were interrupted as his marshal entered the kitchen with the young adeptus - who, unfortunately, immediately dropped to the floor on seeing him. That was...exhausting, really.

Wait. Perhaps he could use the stern thing to his advantage, here?

"Xiao. Enough. Do not prostrate yourself in my presence. I find it rather tiresome, and it impedes conversation. If you must show submission, a simple and brief bow on entering the room will suffice."

Bosacius stared at him in shock, but Morax's attention was focused on the young adeptus, to see his reaction.

"Morax, *what* - "

"Yes, master."

He couldn't quite repress a twitch at the title, but to his relief, Xiao smoothly stood, bowed once - if rather more deeply than he would have preferred - and stood calmly, gaze low. An improvement, at least. Bosacius gave the child a long look, then shot him a *look* before turning to Madame Ping.

Why did the yaksha look so upset with him?

"Ping, you made up some medicinal tea for Xiao, right? Do you know where Morax put it?"

"Yes, I did. Morax?"

"It is in the tea cupboard."

"Then yes, I do know where it is. I take it he could use some?"

"I think so. Xiao, will you be alright waiting here with Madame Ping for a few minutes? Morax and I need to talk."

Xiao turned to Madame Ping, and interestingly, repeated the bow, less deeply.

"This one apologizes for his actions, and swears you are in no danger from it at this time. Are you willing to endure this one's presence?"

Madame Ping looked rather startled.

"I...yes, of course, child."

She might be willing to accept the danger, but...

“Bosacius...”

“We’ll only be in the next room. Please.”

That...was close enough to interfere if something happened...but still, it made him twitchy, leaving two of his people who were potentially a danger to each other alone together...

“Go, Morax. I’ll be fine.”

Fine. *Fine*. He headed through the door that led to his little indoor kitchen garden, holding it open for his marshal. His friend. No matter how irritated he might be at the moment.

Bosacius was talking the moment the door closed.

“You didn’t even show him *how to open the door?*”

Ah.

“It slipped my mind last night. Along with attuning the lights, unfortunately. I was going to this morning, but...well...”

The yaksha sighed and rested his face in one hand.

“I showed him how to deal with your overly-artistic doors on the way to the kitchen, so there’s that. But Morax, please try to be more thoughtful. He’ll never complain if you neglect him, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have needs.”

He winced, and sighed.

“I know. But I...I have never done anything like this before, Bosacius. What else am I missing, do you know?”

The hand on his friend’s face shifted to rub at his temple.

“It looks like you and Ping figured out a way for you to interact with him without setting him off, even if it’s...not something I would normally recommend. But nothing *about* this is normal, I suppose...but if you can continue to *not* terrify and devastate him - “

Morax winced again. He...did not have a good track record with the young adeptus where it came to that, it was true.

” - I suggest you attune him to the lights in his own room, show him where he can bathe, where he can get fresh water, where he’s most likely to find you at need...”

“I told him how to use his bracelet to call for my aid - “

“Morax. Do you *really* think he’ll ever use it for that.”

”...I *had* thought so, yes...”

This time Bosacius outright groaned, and irritation warred with guilt in Morax’s mind.

“Morax, my lord, my friend, despite my best efforts *Xiao still thinks he is a slave*. A slave does not make demands on their master, whatever their circumstances. Certainly not just to ask for

directions. I would be very surprised if he initiated *any* interaction with you. It'll all have to come from your end. The closest he's likely to come is to go find you, and then wait unobtrusively for you to notice him, and that is likely to be in the hopes you'll tell him to do some chore. But if he *knows* where to find you, it'll at least make it *possible*. And making it clear that he is permitted to know your location, and encouraged to seek you out, *might* start to incline him to consider your presence a safe place to be."

He struggled to wrap his mind around Bosacius' words. The thought processes that could lead to such behaviors was...so utterly *foreign* ...he couldn't imagine how they were reached. How could he avoid scaring the child, if he couldn't predict their thinking?

At least he had a starting point now.

"Thank you, Bosacius. I will do my best to do right by the young adeptus, and if you have any more thoughts..."

The yaksha gave him an impenetrable look.

"Give him a waste bin."

Assessments and Enchantments

Chapter Notes

So...this has officially snagged the title of 'chapter that has fought me the most so far'. Not sure what that means for you readers, since you seemed to like the last one that fought me, but there it is.

Next chapter is already started and is proving *much* easier to write, so hopefully there'll be another update soon!

TW: addiction, withdrawal/detoxing, internal dehumanization, uhhhh....can't think of any more at the moment, but as usual if I missed something, let me know in the comments, and I'll gladly edit it in.

It couldn't help but be afraid when mighty one left with Master. Honorable one had said she'd endure his presence, though she *must* still be angry with it. But Master must be even more angry - he certainly sounded like it, *felt* like it - and he'd left too.

Not that it mattered. He was pretty sure he'd be just as scared if they'd stayed. What mattered was that it not show its fear, and wait unobtrusively for orders. Just like before.

After a long moment, honorable one stood, and it braced itself for a well-deserved blow, but she didn't approach him. Instead he heard water pouring, clattering, cupboard doors opening and closing...

Mighty one had said she didn't blame it, but it had not believed him. Mighty one was blind to some things, especially things that were dangers to it. But if she was angry, why did she not strike?

Perhaps she would get in trouble for damaging Master's property. Honorable one was a healer, after all, tasked with repairing harm, not causing it.

Perhaps she already knew what was planned, and considered it sufficient.

It wanted to believe mighty one was right. Oh, how it *wanted* to...but it didn't fit anything he had learned before. He was the lowest of the low, and even *threatening* harm to one higher meant pain, no excuses. And he wasn't sure whether to believe in this addiction thing, yet. But it had said it would wait and do as it was told, so that's what it would do.

As long as it wasn't told to hurt anyone, it was fine.

The hot-and-cold swept over it again, and he struggled not to sway on his feet. It should stay still, eyes low, waiting for instruction - it must not show weakness. Nevermind that its limbs were suddenly trembling as it shivered and sweated and it *would* keep from heaving this time...

It blinked, and jumped as it suddenly realized honorable one was in front of him, offering him a steaming mug. It...really didn't want to try to ingest *anything* right now, much less something so hot...but that gesture was a silent order, wasn't it? He'd told mighty one he'd cooperate. It took the mug, and stared at it for a long moment.

“You can sit if you like, Xiao. I know you aren’t feeling well, and...we need to discuss some things while I’m here.”

He swallowed hard.

“It is not this unworthy one’s place to sit in the presence of its superiors. It will accept any orders honorable one has for it, within the bounds of its contract, and it will answer any questions honorable one has for this ignorant one as best it can.”

“Little one, I am a healer. It distresses me for an ailing patient to push themselves to stand when there is no need. Please...”

It flinched. Honorable one should not have to beg; it had been unforgivably stubborn. He offered her a short bow, then sat on the floor, facing the chair by the table.

Honorable one sat on the floor facing him, and he flinched again. He’d messed up, hadn’t he? It was supposed to do something else...the mug. It swallowed the too-hot liquid swiftly, hoping it would make up for its failure in interpreting the request that he sit. It seemed to do the trick - he risked a glance up without moving his head, and honorable one was smiling at him, a little.

“I hope the tea helps. How are you feeling, child? Not well, I know, but specifically? I haven’t treated someone with your particular addiction before, and I can help you better if I know what course your withdrawal is taking.”

It didn’t know how to answer. It had never been expected to *actually* explain how it felt before. Usually the question was just a prompt to prove it wasn’t weak, by saying it was well. Then Master Moharus - or one of his people - could continue to hurt him.

Honorable one was waiting for an answer.

It didn’t know how to answer.

It had said he would cooperate.

“This one humbly apologizes. This one...does not know how to answer. Please...please forgive this one their incompetence...”

“Oh child...you don’t need to apologize for not knowing something. Perhaps it would help if I ask specific questions. Do your joints and muscles ache?”

What? They always did, how would that help?

“Yes, honorable one, but that is one’s normal state.”

He wished he could sense her presence properly, but things seemed harder to sense these last few hours...she seemed barely there. The anger and irritation and guilt on the other side of the door was plain, though.

It was...more difficult, to be honest, when he couldn’t be sure how she was reacting.

“I...see. Is the pain worse than usual, then?”

“This one does not know, honorable one. This one usually tries to ignore it.”

“Then, do you feel hot, or cold?”

That it could answer properly.

“Both at once, now. Either one comes and goes.”

“Shivers and sweats?”

“Both, honorable one.”

“I know your body has trouble tolerating food still, but has the nausea been worse? Maybe cropping up when you *haven't* had your broth recently?”

Oh. That was...important?

“Yes, honorable one.”

“Have you been feeling unusually weak?”

It froze. That was a dangerous question. Never admit to weakness, *never...* but it had promised mighty one...

“Y-y-yes, honorable one.”

There was quiet for a moment, and when honorable spoke again, it was quieter, gentler.

“It’s alright to feel weak, little one. You’re ill, and none of this is your fault. We’re going to try to help you feel better.”

There...wasn’t a question in there. He hadn’t promised to believe any of them. Only to let them take care of him, and implied, to cooperate with their attempts to do so.

Eventually, honorable one sighed, and moved on.

“Have you been having pains in your back? Here, or here?”

She turned and gestured to a couple of spots on her own back, rather than touching his. It was grateful.

“No, honorable one.”

“Well, there’s that much at least. Headaches?”

It had to think about that one. Not now, but...

“Sometimes, honorable one.”

“Hmm. May I see your fingers? I don’t need to touch them, just see the nails.”

It obediently held out its hands for inspection, but couldn’t keep from shaking a little, despite her claims she wouldn’t touch them. Fingers were easy to break, and *surely* she wanted revenge...

“Good, thank you. Could you look up at me, please?”

He obeyed, and then jumped as the door opened and Master and mighty one came back in.

“Ah, good timing...Bosacius, Morax, could you come look at Xiao’s eyes please, and tell me what you see? It’s subtle enough that I’m not certain...”

It swallowed hard, and forced itself to remain still. *Why* did she have to involve Master? He already had been feeling so angry, bothering him with something as inconsequential as itself couldn't possibly help matters...

"Is that...are they sheened over with anemo? How odd..."

"It might be related to what I was going to ask you to check, Ping. His presence has grown...far stronger than seems reasonable. Do you have a way to check whether it's more than it should be?"

He quailed. Had it done something wrong? He had worried about looking too weak, but now it seemed they were worried about the opposite, and if it was too strong they might feel the need to beat it until it was weaker so that it wouldn't have the strength to defy them, couldn't fight free - he barely remembered to stay still, not to throw itself forward, Master had been very clear it should not -

"This one is loyal this one promises this one won't be defiant please have mercy please this one won't fight please - "

Mighty one knelt before it and met its eyes squarely.

"Xiao, it's alright. You haven't done anything wrong. It's okay to be strong. I'm just worried you might be producing more energy than your body knows how to handle, and don't want you to be hurt."

It couldn't see honorable one from here now, but it dared a glance up at Master, who nodded, for all his presence still felt angry and upset.

"As Bosacius says, you are not in trouble, Xiao. Madame Ping?"

Honorable one came into view as she moved up next to mighty one, and held out a hand.

"Little one, may I have your hand, so I can do a reading? It won't hurt, I promise. I just need to see how your body is handling things."

He was shaking. It shouldn't be shaking, it should be obeying. It was supposed to cooperate. But something was wrong here and despite their words he was *clearly* at the center of it and they were all so *close* and what if they...he closed his eyes tight and tried to take a deep breath. He needed to be calm. Panic never helped, fear never *helped* it just made things worse.

Xiao put his hand in honorable one's.

In the face of Xiao's clear terror, Madame Ping's own fears were quickly swept aside for concern. He reacted to her simple questions alternately with confusion and fear, sometimes both, and even sitting he was clearly having trouble staying upright. It was easy to forget the nightmare figure leaning over her in the night, when confronted with this obviously ill and frightened child...and the way he'd reacted when Saish had voiced concerns about his adeptal energy levels...

She couldn't imagine the courage it took for him to place his trembling, too warm hand in hers.

"Thank you, little one. This won't take long."

The statement was even more true than she'd thought. The moment she began her reading she felt the cacophany of winds inside him, entirely too much anemo trying to get free, threatening to burn him up from the inside with the need to *get out*...

Bosacius was right. But *how*? Adeptal energy was natural to adepts - their bodies knew when to stop producing more, just like they knew when to stop producing extra blood. The only thing she could think of was that crystal structure, but it hadn't seemed to interfere with his energy systems, just fed on it.

How it happened didn't matter as much as how to deal with it. They could look into a more permanent solution once he was done detoxing, but for now he needed to *use* some of that energy before he exploded.

She let go of his hand, and tried to catch his gaze.

"Xiao, I know this sounds strange, but could you teleport to the entrance of the subspace and back here ten times for me?"

To her surprise, the child looked to Morax for verification, not Bosacius. Perhaps worried the task would upset him?

"As Madame Ping says, Xiao. She is the healer."

Immediately the boy was replaced with light green swirls that didn't even have a chance to fade before his form flickered back inside them once...twice...all ten times, before he was once more seated on the floor before her. She couldn't help blinking at him a few times. That had been...extremely rapid. Most adepts, even ones with power to burn, paused between teleports to give themselves time to reorient on their new surroundings, or they'd get dizzy very quickly.

Did he take in the details of a new place that quickly, or was he just so dizzy normally he didn't notice?

....given his malnutrition and apparently constant injuries, probably the latter, unfortunately.

"Very good, child. May I do another reading, to see how much that helped?"

He silently extended his hand - still trembling, unfortunately - and she took it as gently as she could.

Unfortunately, ten short range teleports - which would have *exhausted* her - had barely made a dent in his power levels. It would take a lot more to get him to a safer point...she thought for a moment on what a safe alternative might be.

Shapechange required a lot of power, but was a bad idea with so many still-healing injuries.

Battle skills were often power intensive, but off the list for oh-so-many reasons.

What about something that was *like* how he might use his power in combat, but used harmlessly?

"Morax, could you make a temporary alcove in one of the walls here, perhaps your own height on a side?"

There was silence for a moment.

“Of course, but why...?”

“He’s too strong for teleporting to help, at least with such short distances. I want him to try creating and maintaining a small cyclone for a period of time, and thought it would be best to have a defined, safe space to keep it in.”

“Ah.”

She tried to ignore the way the small hand in hers shook more at her words. It would only add to his stress, right now, to try to ask him why he was afraid - and he might not even *know*, himself. Instead she waited for the sound of shifting, grinding stone to come to a halt, then stood.

“Alright, Xiao. I want you to sit in the chair across from the new alcove, and make a good, fast cyclone in there. Don’t let it get out, or slow down, and keep it up until I say to stop, alright?”

The child nodded, but hesitated, shaking. Suddenly she realized how crowded he must feel, and moved back, gesturing the others back as well. With the path clear, Xiao quickly - if unsteadily - made his way to the indicated chair, and she waited while he got the requested cyclone started.

“A little faster, I think, if you can do so and keep it in the alcove, Xiao.”

“Yes, honorable one.”

The cyclone grew noticeably louder and faster, but stayed where it should.

“Good. Now just keep it up until I say to stop, alright?”

“Yes, honorable one.”

...how long would it take for him to start using her name? Nevermind. That was a concern for later. For now, she turned to Morax and Bosacius.

“So, my guess was right, then?”

“Yes. For whatever reason...he has built up too much power, and for now he’ll just have to use up the excess. I’ll add a secondary alert for power levels when I put the medical alerts into his bracelet, Morax.”

The old dragon nodded, still smothering his anger, and Bosacius crossed his lower arms, looking worried. Ping sighed, anticipating his next question.

“No, Bosacius, I can’t look into why or how right now. The withdrawal process has his body in an unpredictable mess as is, and I wouldn’t be able to tell one cause from another.”

“But you’ll be able to treat it later?”

She groaned.

“*I don’t know*. Our energy systems aren’t just of the body, and I can’t heal the spirit. If the damage is there, he might simply have to watch his energy levels for *life*. Healing has *limits*! And I keep running into them over and over lately...”

Suddenly Saish was holding her, and she didn’t remember him moving, or when she’d started crying.

“It’s alright, Ping. We know you’re doing everything you can...it’s not your fault he...got here in such bad shape. He’s a strong kid. We’ll figure this out. I’m sorry for pushing.”

The healer took a shaky breath, and wrapped her arms around her friend in return.

“I know you’re worried, and that’s why you push. It’s alright.”

They just stood like that for a little, and gradually she realized Saish was shaking. Ping leaned back to look at his face, hoping he wasn’t crying - this all had to be getting to him, and he *was* recovering from a head injury - but instead she found him biting his lip, clearly suppressing laughter. He met her eyes and then glanced to the side.

She looked over, and despite everything, had to repress a chuckle at the way Morax was oh-so-obviously trying to pretend he didn’t feel awkward. The dragon finally noticed her looking at him, and relaxed a fraction.

The poor thing never did know how to handle his own emotions, much less displays of others’.

Today must have him ready to jump out of his skin...

...but she...really didn’t have the energy to deal with that right now, she finally admitted to herself. Xiao was her patient. She’d do what she could for him, add the enchantments to her bracelet, and then - as long as no *new* disasters showed up - she’d eat a solid meal and *sleep*. And not interact with anyone until she had to. Even she had her limits, and she much preferred not to let anyone *see* when she reached them.

Maybe she’d pull out her old zither. She hadn’t played much, since they’d lost Guizhong...but her old friend would have been devastated, if she let all her skill rust away.

Xiao had probably been at it long enough to measure the impact, by now. She pulled the rest of the way out of Saish’s arms with a quick smile of thanks, and walked over to the child. There was such a look of *focus* on his face...and such shadows under his eyes. He must be exhausted.

“Alright, Xiao, now I need to check how much of a difference this has made. May I hold your hand for another reading?”

He didn’t react. Was he so intent on his task he didn’t hear her? It *was* generating rather a lot of noise...she spoke louder.

“Xiao?”

Still no reaction. She hesitated, then touched his shoulder to get his attention, not at all surprised when he jumped before turning to look at her, trepidation in his eyes before he looked down.

“Honorable one?”

“You can let the winds die down for now, little one. May I have your hand, to check how much it helped?”

The cyclone was gone in seconds, and a shaking hand was stretched out towards her. She’d...have to find a way to try to regain his trust, later. A healer afraid of her patient was bad; a patient afraid of his healer was worse.

She took his hand, and *felt*...

It had helped. It had helped a lot. His body was still straining to contain all that power, but he was no longer in danger of destroying himself, for the moment. This was a workable setpoint for the excess energy alert, and the difference was measurable enough that she could use this for ‘treatment’, for now. They could find something more practical when he was done detoxing.

“Morax, do you still have those sandglasses that were gifted to you a few decades back?”

She must have startled him. It took a few seconds for him to answer.

“I do. But what...”

“Could you get the one-hour one, please?”

Another moment of silence, then the mild bursts of power as he teleported away, and back. She kept her attention focused on the child before her, reading his physical status more thoroughly while she waited, making sure he hadn’t failed to mention anything dire.

So far, at least on the physical side, his withdrawal was going better than expected. This was good, but she couldn’t help being wary, given the last couple weeks.

“Here. Are you willing to explain why you want such an esoteric object, now?”

She let go of Xiao’s hand to take the item, with a small smile. Morax was definitely feeling impatient today. Ping couldn’t help but think it was good for him to be thrown off balance once in awhile...she just wished it wasn’t in a way that could potentially have repercussions for her patient.

“Naturally. This is a useful and easy to understand means of measuring time for Xiao. Child, you see how all the sand is in the bottom of this now? If you flip it over, it takes an hour for all the sand to be in the bottom again. Once a day, I want you to maintain a cyclone, like you just did, for that length of time. If you can’t do it all at once, you can set the glass on its side while you take a break, and the sand will stop flowing until it’s upright again. Do you understand?”

Xiao nodded.

“I also want you to do so for an hour at some point before you go to bed tonight, preferably as soon as I’m done adjusting the enchantments on your bracelet. This is to help you keep your adeptal energy from building up to dangerous levels again.”

The child tensed up further, and she wracked her brain trying to figure out why...oh.

“The enchantments I’m adding aren’t anything you need to be concerned about, child. They’re for your own safety. There will be alerts for myself and Morax in case your physical condition deteriorates too far, so we can help you, and one to alert you if your energy levels get too high again. That will sound like a high peeping, and if you hear it, I want you to do an hour with your cyclone immediately, whether you’ve already done one that day or not, understand?”

She didn’t mention that the latter would also alert Morax if Xiao’s energy failed to drop back down within a few minutes, or that the health alerts for each of them would be set at different levels of distress. The young adeptus had enough to keep track of, and she could see that he was straining to take in even this much information, at the moment.

”...yes, honorable one. This one is to make and maintain a cyclone in this space until the top portion of the glass empties, once a day and whenever this one hears a high peeping sound.”

She smiled at the young one.

“Very good. I’ll be stopping by at least once a day to check you over like I did earlier, and Morax will send for me if I’m needed. Do you have any questions before I alter your bracelet?”

“No, honorable one.”

Would he ask them if he did? But she couldn’t force him to. She could only ask.

“Alright then. May I see it?”

Xiao extended his right arm...still shaking, and it occurred to Ping to wonder how much of that was actually fear. He’d been having trouble remaining upright, perhaps it was as much, or more, exhaustion and weakness?

...she wasn’t sure which was better.

Nevermind. One more task, and then she could go rest. She gently took hold of the jade cuff bracelet around the child’s wrist, and closed her eyes to aid in visualization.

It was no trouble at all to find the existing enchantment - two, really, already intertwined. Morax didn’t do anything by halves, and he’d poured enough power into these that he’d know if Xiao called for him from the other side of the continent. She could use that, but she’d have to tease him about that later...she began the work of hooking in the beginning threads of the familiar formulae. The first enchantments she could practically do in her sleep; basic medical alerts, with two different recipients, at two different levels of physical distress. Xiao would be in bad shape for a few days, probably, and it would be best if she wasn’t being called unless she was actually needed, but Morax would need to be there for him to help if he got too weak or feverish. She left the tail ends, where she’d put the alerting sensation, floating free for now.

The other pair were a little more complicated, if similar. She had to tie in Xiao’s *current* energy levels as a measure and trigger - and then edge it up slightly, so it wouldn’t go off immediately. And then the second was dependant on the first, instead of connected to the trigger directly...giving time for Xiao to deal with things, but alerting Morax if he couldn’t, or didn’t, for whatever reason. It took longer, but really, it was just a few substitutions in the variables, and was easier than she’d expected.

Which was good, because even with hooking the new enchantments to draw on the old for power and targets, she was finding herself getting exhausted. It was increasingly difficult to focus.

Just the alerting sensations left...for herself, she set her usual. For Xiao, the peeping she’d told him to expect, emanating from the bracelet itself. For Morax...hmm. Something he’d have been unlikely to pick for any of his existing alerts. For the health warning, she set it to a sharp pinch in his side, that would repeat every several seconds until he was within a certain proximity of the patient - technically, of the bracelet, but that should be *on* Xiao, so - and for the energy level warning...ah. A burning smell, that would fade when Xiao’s energy dropped sufficiently. A reminder of what too much excess power could do to an adeptus.

With those set, she wound the formula strings into the substance of the bracelet, and set the final hooks to make them active. She watched for a moment to make sure there were no obvious problems, then withdrew her mental senses - she often described working with enchantments as similar to a reading - and opened her eyes.

“There we go. I’m all done, Xiao, and thank you for being such a good patient.”

For some reason, her words left the poor child looking confused and worried, and she repressed the

urge to sigh. He misinterpreted so much...she wanted to know what was going on in his head, to set it to rights, but knew she was not likely to be someone he'd open up to just now.

She'd just have to leave that to Bosacius, and as expected, the big yaksha moved to talk with the child when she got up to give Morax the details on which alert meant what.

Now, if things could keep from going *horribly wrong* for just a month or so...

Maybe then, she could think straight again.

Show and Tell

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: Blockheadedness. Much blockheadedness.

Morax tried to find his usual air of confidence as he walked back to the kitchen. He could send for Madame Ping if he really needed to, he knew, but she clearly was in desperate need of rest. Bosacius would be gone, about his duties for at least two days.

All he had to do was keep an eye on Xiao.

Well, and his own usual duties, of course, but unless something came up, there wasn't much that would force him to leave his abode in the next couple days.

Surely he could keep from making a mess of things for that long...

...surely...

He was intelligent. He *could* learn. They had a plan of action and safeguards in place. He would be fine. Xiao would be...not fine, but Morax could at least ensure he *survived* the next few days. And perhaps he could cheer the child up a little, if he was up to exploring later.

He had to admit to himself, if no one else, that he was nervous.

He was not *used* to feeling nervous.

He was pretty sure he did not like it, entirely.

Though it came with a warmth when he thought about the results if things went well...

He could handle this.

He was a *dragon*. He was meant to handle things alone.

Morax entered his kitchen, and froze. The sandglass was placed neatly in the alcove, the chairs neatly under the table, and Xiao was bowed to the exact degree from earlier, standing next to the new alcove as well.

After a moment, the young adeptus straightened from his bow, gaze still on the floor. He was wavering as he stood, why was he standing, what was he waiting for...ah.

"You may sit if you like, Xiao. I do not wish you to cause yourself harm by standing when you should not, for my sake. I have some paperwork to get done; feel free to explore or rest, as you will. If you are thirsty, feel free to use water from the pump by the sink. I will show you the bathing area before dinner tonight."

It was late afternoon now; hopefully that would give the young adeptus some time to relax. Except...he wasn't moving. Maybe because Morax was still there? Maybe if he left it would make the child feel free to do...something. He hesitated a moment longer, then turned back the way he

came, intending to go to his office.

Wait.

Bosacius had said Xiao should know where to find him...

Morax turned back around.

“Actually, Xiao, follow me first. You should know where to find me if you have any questions.”

Xiao promptly moved to stand just within Morax’s reach, not saying a word. Morax found himself hesitating again, then shook himself and turned back down the hall.

His main office was fairly near the entrance, specifically so it would be quick and easy to find for guests. He would normally count it a short walk, but while the presence behind him maintained the same precise distance, he could hear Xiao’s breath coming harder.

He would have to remember to walk slower with him later. For now...well, they were almost there, and then the child could rest, or explore, or whatever he wished to do with his time. He paused at the door - ‘decorated’ with stacks of papers, scrolls, and pens, but he had not been able to convince himself to put anything more artistic on this *particular* door - and pressed the geo symbol on the central inkwell.

“This is my office, Xiao, and if I am doing paperwork this is where you will find me. I am generally perfectly happy to be interrupted from such a task, so if you need anything, do not be concerned that it will bother me. Now, you are free to go have fun and do as you like until I collect you to show you the bathing room before dinner. Do not worry that you need to remain easy to find; this is my subspace, and as such, I can readily locate whatever or whoever I wish within it.”

The god sat at his desk, and began sorting through the top few papers on his desk, deciding where to begin. This year’s list of hopefuls looking for permission to try for entrance to the yaksha, perhaps. If Sinaria was only the first of Moharus’ allies to retaliate, they might be in for a busy few years.

Behind him, he felt Xiao enter the room, position himself to one side of the door, and...just stand there.

He restrained himself from *ordering* the child to go explore, or rest. He reminded himself that his marshal had said that Xiao should be permitted to do exactly this, to learn that Morax was safe to be around. And *he* didn’t really want to be ordering the young adeptus about more than he had to; it might be the simplest way to get cooperation, but it only reinforced the damned notion that he was the boy’s *master*, and that was something he wanted eradicated as soon as was reasonably feasible.

He could sense that the child’s gaze was on the floor. So why did he feel like eyes were drilling into the back of his skull?

Never before had he regretted his arrangement of furniture in this room, for all he had been informed it was odd. Facing the door would just torment him with how much he had to get done before he left. But having a constant presence behind him...a powerful, relatively unknown presence, for all it was the presence of someone under his care...wore on his nerves. He held tightly to human shape. A human form didn’t show hackles raising quite so readily.

Needless to say, under the circumstances, the paperwork progressed slowly.

A high peeping sounded behind Morax, and he paused in his reading for a moment before remembering what it meant. Young Xiao had no such delay; by the time he'd pulled his mind out of the dry reports enough to remember the enchantment, Xiao had already slipped away. A moment's concentration and he found the child in the kitchen, following Madame Ping's instructions. Good.

The tension left his shoulders, and he tackled his work with more energy. If he got enough done now, he could justify showing the young adeptus his favorite mural this evening...

With a deep sigh of relief, Morax signed the letter that was his last task of the day. There was a lot he could, and did, delegate, but some matters required his personal attention, whether he liked it or not. The reasons varied from it being a matter that could alter the course of his realm, to some prissy being that would be offended at any less than the personal attention of the god in charge - oh, how he *hated* dealing with those - but he had sworn and contracted to properly lead and rule the people of this realm, and he could not, *would not* shirk his duty.

And he had not, despite the constant temptation to go check on the young adeptus, to make sure he was doing well, to see if he needed anything...

A temptation he was now free to give in to. A glance at the office mural showed it was well into evening; perfect. He would go and heat up some broth and tea for the boy, see how he was doing. And if he was up to it...

Morax did not *cackle*. Dragons don't cackle. It was inelegant and undignified and altogether undraconic. So whatever that sound was that escaped his throat on the way to the kitchen, it was *not* a cackle.

A high pitched, eager growl perhaps.

...he was glad there was no one to witness it.

It was...odd, being concerned with such things in his own home. This was supposed to be where he could be what he was instead of what he was expected to be...but he was the one who'd made the suggestion, and he didn't regret it.

He slowed his headlong rush in the last few feet. He could sense Xiao in the kitchen still - he'd been there every time he had checked, since his alarm had gone off - and from what Madame Ping had said, it was best to be formal around him for now. Authoritative. He sighed, and walked in his more usual, elegant, sedate pace.

As he had suspected would be the case, the young adeptus was once again bent in the bow he had permitted him, and rose from it by the time he took two steps into the kitchen. It was...better, at least, than the way he'd acted before, but...Morax sighed. He *had* told the boy it was an acceptable alternative.

...Xiao was trembling where he stood. The dragon narrowed his eyes - why did he keep insisting on *standing* when he was clearly unwell?

“Sit. I will prepare you your broth and tea. How was your afternoon?”

He didn't know for sure *what* the child had been doing in here that whole time, and was curious. What was so fascinating in his kitchen?

It took no time at all to dig the pot of broth Madame Ping had brought out of the cryo box and set it to heating, and the tin of tea was still out from earlier. Xiao still hadn't said anything by the time he had the teapot filled and heating as well, and he turned and gave him a curious look.

Xiao quickly sat down at the look - he hadn't initially, apparently - and stared at the table.

“This one is unsure how to answer the question, Master.”

“Hmm.”

Morax pulled down two mugs, and spooned tea leaves into one.

“Did you enjoy spending time in here? I was surprised you chose not to explore further.”

“Th-this one apologizes, Master. This one did not realize that was an order.”

“It was not. Now, would you like to see the bathing area now, while things heat, or after your broth?”

“W-whatever Master prefers.”

“Hmm.”

He truly had no preference, but the young adeptus had moved from trembling to shaking, and he had to conclude it was *something* he said. So. Distraction, not comfort, yes? He could do this.

“Follow me.”

It was not far, down the hall and approximately across from Xiao's chamber - he had decided long ago that it was convenient to place it across from his guest rooms, since it prevented short-term guests from wandering in search of them and getting lost in his tunnels. As before, the child placed himself precisely within Morax's reach as he followed, the distance never wavering.

After a few paces, he slowed, hearing the child's panting. At least after he knew where things were, Xiao should be able to teleport to them - that would likely be easier for him than walking, at the moment. The dragon wished he could just pick up the boy and carry him, but he could all too easily imagine the lecture he would get from Bosacius if he tried...technically, he outranked his marshal, but they were also friends, and his *friend* had no problem telling him off when he needed it. As he had proven earlier.

No matter. That went both ways, and it was good to have people willing to point out he was not infallible. The mistakes he would have made over the centuries, had no one dared to point them out...he was glad for it, truly. Just...not when it was so fresh.

“Ah, here we are.”

He stopped in front of a mural of lakes and rivers, and waited to be sure Xiao was watching before he pressed the hydro symbol...

...except the child's gaze remained firmly on the floor.

“Xiao, I cannot show you where the door-trigger is if you do not look up.”

Immediately the young adeptus’ gaze jerked to his hand, and Morax winced. Perhaps that had been...a little *too* stern. He hoped it would not take him too long to find the right balance; he did not want to hurt the child if he could avoid it. He pressed the hydro symbol, and the door slid open, revealing the bathing room.

He smiled and stepped inside, gesturing to the very large cave filled with pools and waterfalls and streams, all in a variety of temperatures, all decorated with murals or crystal gardens or underground plantlife or some combination of the above. Scattered throughout in decorative containers were bathing supplies and towels, such that they were never far, no matter where one chose to enjoy the water.

This ‘room’ had taken him a long time to perfect, and Morax thought he was justified in being proud. It had been over five hundred years since a guest had been unable to find their ideal bathing solution in here. The cave ceiling even mimicked the night sky, with glowing crystals imitating stars, so those less than comfortable underground could be at peace. He turned, eager to see Xiao’s reaction...

Xiao was staring at the floor again.

Perhaps he was expecting too much...the child was exhausted, and ill. Morax tried to hide his disappointment - he had hoped this would cheer Xiao up...

“Everything in here is free for you to use at any time, save for when you are required to be in your room at night. I...hope you enjoy the use of the room. Now then, your broth and the tea water are likely about ready - how about we teleport back, instead of walking?”

The child did not respond, and he sighed. He’d just have to teleport to the kitchen and hope Xiao followed - which he did, promptly, and to Morax’s relief all he had to do was point at the chair and Xiao sat, this time. He did not like feeling as though every attempt to get the child to take care of himself was an argument.

The teapot started squealing within seconds of their arrival, and he quickly pulled it off the heat and poured it into the tea mug to steep. After a moment, he got down one of his own favorite blends and another mug - he preferred using finer cups, usually, but perhaps Xiao would feel more at ease if he was drinking from one like his.

With both mugs of tea steeping, he checked the pot to find it had just begun to simmer. Perfect. He ladled out a mug of broth and set it aside to cool for a bit as well. He’d return it to the cryo box once it was no longer actively *hot*. No need to strain the enchantment.

Unfortunately, the young adeptus seemed rather alarmed when he sat down with tea as well, after providing Xiao with his own. Wide golden eyes stared at him from across the table, before snapping back down, their owner once more shaking. Even *he* could pick up that cue.

“Go ahead and drink, young one. I simply enjoy a cup of tea around this time, myself.”

He took a sip of his tea to prove his point, and after a long moment, Xiao took his mug of broth, downed it in one go, grimaced, and followed it equally quickly with the tea. Morax struggled not to chuckle. Was this what his mealtimes were normally like? They would have to find him something he liked better than the broth. The child clearly found it...disgusting, from the looks of things. Perhaps Marchosius would have some ideas...

His second sip, and his musings, were halted halfway when Morax realized that Xiao was now staring at the table and shaking like a leaf.

...had his words not reassured him at all?

“What is wrong?”

The boy shook harder. How did Bosacius *manage* this?

“This one has nothing to complain of, Master.”

He sighed and set his tea down.

“Xiao, for the time being, we are living together. Room mates, if you will. This time will be long and difficult if we cannot communicate our problems. I have no wish to alarm you, or scare you, but I am not as good as Bosacius at figuring out what you are thinking. It would please me, and set my mind at ease, if you would express your concerns.”

The silence stretched. The dragon fought to be patient; not normally a problem, but this *child* seemed to poke and prod at all his more active instincts at every turn. This...obvious fear...had him jumping out of his skin, looking for what needed slaying to protect Xiao, and knowing that it was *him* the boy was afraid of did *not* help.

“M-master has been s-spending rather a lot of t-time and e-e-energy on this one. This one knows it is not worth such, and is c-concerned what the c-consequences of this w-waste will be, of d-demanding so much f-from one so exalted as M-master...”

... *what*? How did that even make sense? If he didn't consider Xiao worth his time, why would he have bothered to make a contract with him in the first place?

“I do not consider it a waste. You are far from demanding, young one. If anything you do not ask for enough.”

This was so *frustrating*! It felt almost like the child was speaking a different language. He understood the words individually, but strung together they made *no sense*. How over stone and under stars did Bosacius parse this?!

”....a-apologies, Master, but this one does not understand.”

He wanted to slam his head into a pillar. He reminded himself that forming one and doing so would probably further alarm the child.

So Morax rubbed his temples instead.

Which *somehow* must have been *terrifying* because *now* the child was staring at the table with his shoulders around his ears and trying to *shake into little pieces*!

There had to be a way around this.

There *had* to.

He could not be terrifying the child every moment they were together, he would die of *heart failure* before he ever got a *chance* to get through his withdrawal.

He sighed. Right. Calm. He had to be *calm* around the child. For all he felt anything but right now...

“It is alright. Just...do not worry about consequences for taking up my time. It is my decision where I spend my time and energy, and if that is on you, it was not your doing.”

“Yes, Master.”

The boy *said* that but he didn't relax at *all*, as far as Morax could tell.

Oh. Of course not. He was trying to comfort when he was supposed to distract instead.

“Follow me. I have something I want to show you.”

The boy followed at the *same exact distance* as before. Why? Was this something Moharus required? And if so, *why*?

No matter. *He finally had someone new to show his mural.* Madame Ping and the rest were long since bored with it, and Azhdaha was almost as familiar with every stone tile of it as he was. Surely this would cheer up Xiao! How often did one get to see a mural that was literally miles long?

He'd forgotten how long a walk it was though...he normally just teleported down. He'd had to slow down three times when he heard Xiao's breathing worsen.

This was ridiculous. The boy was ill. There was no need to wear him out this much.

He teleported them down.

Xiao yelped, and he winced. He...probably should have warned him...

“I am sorry. I thought this would be easier.”

He flowed into his true form, speeding through the air to the mural-covered wall, to the edge where he'd just barely begun to sketch in the battle with Moharus.

“I spend a lot of my free time working on this mural, adding in whatever events or thoughts are plaguing my mind at the time. If you follow it back that way, all the way to the beginning, you'll find that it shows near the entirety of the war from my perspective as a result. I sketch my thoughts into the cave wall with my claws, then I measure and go to the quarry section over *there* and select the best mineral for the tile and - “

He finally glanced back, and found Xiao staring at him open mouthed. At *him*, not at the mural.

...he had to admit he was a little miffed.

“What?”

Xiao wanted this day to be over. He wanted *everything* to be over. He was terrified, and eaten alive with guilt, and could hardly keep his eyes open except that he kept being jolted awake by new horrible things every few minutes. He felt miserable and sick and even though he was in very little

actual pain...he almost missed Master Moharus. At least he used to know what to *expect*...

First Master ignored him. Then he told him to sit in his presence, and then lead him off to show him where things were instead of just sending him to find him so he wouldn't use up more of Master's time, then he *served him* and *sat at the same table* and he was *sure* he'd get in trouble for the lack of respect...but nothing happened. And then he'd led him off somewhere *else*, and endless tunnel deeper into this place with all that stone pressing overhead and it was getting harder and harder to walk, much less maintain the right distance...

...and then there'd been a flash of golden light and they'd been somewhere else, and he'd disgraced himself with a yelp. He'd been so *sure* that light would hurt him, his punishment finally there, but it had only been a teleport. And then before he could even catch his breath Master had...flowed...out of his clothes and turned into a *monster*.

Like him.

Like Bosacius.

And bright one, and gentle one.

Was this why Master tolerated them, tolerated *him*?

It was all too much. He couldn't think. This was against everything he knew. Master Moharus had made it very clear that his wings, the slightly-too-thick fingernails that almost looked like claws, the slits in his eyes were all marks of his evil nature. That godly being, divine beings, had no such traits, that they were clean and beautiful and *more*. And now...now...

"What?"

Xiao jerked and almost fell forward to the floor before he remembered Master didn't like that. That tone *always* meant trouble...

...or it had with Master Moharus.

But *Master* was a monster, the same as him.

Was that why he was so generous, why he kept *not punishing* him?

Maybe...maybe he could dare...

What was the worst that could happen? That Master would get mad, and kill him slowly and horribly? He'd expected that this morning anyway. He *still* expected it when it was proven, in the end, that it wasn't some illness making him eat dreams. So what did he have to lose, really?

"M-master...is...like this one?"

Master stared at him for a long moment, then landed in front of him. He looked down at himself for a long moment, then back at Xiao.

"In what way, exactly, do you think I look like a bird?"

He sounded offended. Xiao cringed.

"No, no this one m-meant..."

He couldn't say it. If Morax was offended already, how much more would he be by being called a

monster?

Master blinked at him for a moment.

“Xiao, did you think my human form was my *only* form?”

Of course he had. Master was a *god*. Gods were...above such bestial, monstrous things as...as tails, and fangs, and wings. But how could he *explain* that without offending Master further?

“Y-yes, Master.”

Master stared at him for awhile longer.

“When I killed Moharus, he was in human shape. Did you ever see him in another?”

That was easier to answer.

“No, Master.”

“Hmm.”

Master made that sound at the most worrying times. Xiao wished he knew what it meant. Suddenly he felt the ground shift beneath his feet, and he quickly moved aside - only to see an elegant chair form itself from the stone.

“Sit, Xiao. You are already exhausted, and this explanation may take awhile.”

He only hesitated a moment. That was a clear order, after all, no matter how nervous it made him. Master, still in his monstrous form, coiled up in front of him, with his enormous head closest to Xiao.

“The vast majority of gods, if they have a human shape at all, take it only for convenience. The human shape has, among other things, wonderfully dexterous hands, and is useful for interacting with the mortal populace without scaring them out of their wits. I am an adeptus as well as a god...do you know what that is?”

Honorable one and Bosacius had told him *he* was one, and that they were too, but they had not explained further. Xiao hadn't dared ask.

“No, Master. This one apologizes for his ignorance.”

“Your ignorance is the failing of your former master, not of yourself. An adeptus *always* has a form other than human, that is their true form. Mortals refer to us as ‘illuminated beasts’, possibly because we almost always have glowing markings...but I have never really understood the minds of mortals. My true form, as you can see, is that of a dragon. Yours is presumably some sort of bird, though I do not know what specific type of bird your clan consisted of. Madame Ping chooses to keep hers private, as do a number of others, these days. So in a sense, yes, I am like you - we are both adepts. But as you did not know what the term meant, I do not believe that was what you saw in common...may I ask what that was?”

Xiao quailed. He really, *really* didn't want to answer that question.

A question from a master was the same as an order.

He knew this.

He had...defied that rule so many times already, since Master Moharus died...it was tempting to do so again...

But Master's full attention and gaze was on him now. he was unlikely to be distracted.

Xiao swallowed and stared at his knees.

"Th-this one was always told its w-wings were proof of its monstrosity. Th-that Master allowed those with such proofs to s-serve in high rank, as m-marshal, and generals...th-this one thought Master was exceedingly tolerant, and generous. Wh-when Th-this one s-saw..."

His words stumbled to a halt. He couldn't. He *couldn't* call Master a monster, not to his face, he... He didn't need to.

"I see. So you thought, perhaps I was a monster, like you."

He shrank in on himself, and nodded.

"I would not use the same terminology, but it was a good observation. I find it interesting that the *true* monster, Moharus, so completely eschewed his own true form."

Master gave him a long look.

"A being's form is not what makes them a monster. Their choices, their treatment of others, their priorities - these show one's true nature. Your former master was incredibly selfish, taking everything from his people and giving them nothing but pain and suffering in return. He did the same to you, taking his own entertainment and victories at your expense. This selfishness with disregard to the needs of others is the mark of an evil being. It was also stupid. Even if his greed had not brought him to my attention, it would have been his downfall eventually, as he stripped his land and people beyond their ability to sustain themselves. *He* was the monster, a classification of morality. *We* are adepti, a classification of our nature. Remember this."

Xiao nodded. He might not...understand...most of that, but he would do his best to remember.

Morax groaned and turned over. He would have to reform his bed later, if it had developed a crack large enough to pinch his side. He could deal with it now easily enough, but it had been an...exhausting day, to put it mildly, and he could not have been asleep for more than a couple hours.

There was another sharp pinch on his side, and the god sat up. His side had been facing up, it couldn't be the bed...

The pinch came again, and he remembered....

Illness

Chapter Notes

I hope this helps keep all of you occupied during the update maintenance!

TW: graphic illness, hallucinations, perceived death of a character

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiao was very, very glad there was no one around to see or hear him right now. He couldn't control his reactions much anymore.

He'd never felt so cold, even in snow and ice. Before he'd gotten too weak to do so, he'd given in and risked pulling a blanket off the bed, but even wrapped in that and his wings he couldn't stop shivering, his teeth wouldn't stop chattering, and his spine felt like ice.

At the same time, parts of him felt like he was boiling. Sweat poured off him and it was hard to breathe. And even as his skin felt all sticky and hot with the sweat, it also felt too tight, as though it had dried out under the heat of one of Master Moharus' furnaces.

His bones *ached*, and his muscles with them, as though he'd been pounded on for hours with wide leather straps. That had happened once, he *knew* what it felt like. He was pretty sure he couldn't move anymore. He could hardly grip the blanket, his fingers aching dryly and trembling when he tried to do anything with them.

Not that it mattered. His head hurt so much that he could hardly see through the pain. If he couldn't see, how could he move effectively anyway? Except he wanted to, he *needed* to, because his stomach was roiling too and he didn't think he could keep it down anymore. He hadn't collected the new wastebin Master had made when he got the blanket because he'd been sure he'd get in trouble for getting vomit all over the beautiful thing, but surely he'd get in more trouble for getting it all over the floor again, when Master had been kind enough to clean up his earlier messes by swallowing them in stone without a word...

He couldn't keep a low moan from escaping his throat. He was pretty sure he couldn't remember ever feeling so miserable before. Even if sleep was bad, he wished he could just sleep through it, but even though he was so exhausted he wanted to cry...or was crying, he couldn't tell...something about that misery forced him to stay awake.

Acid surged up his throat again, filled the back of his mouth, and he barely found the strength to swallow it back...and then it surged again, and this time he didn't manage it completely, the stuff dripped down his chin and he sobbed weakly. He had to get to the bin, he *had* to. The rest of this was bad enough but if he got another mess all over the floor and it made Master mad...he didn't want to think about it. Master hadn't lost his temper with Xiao yet and he didn't want to know what it would be like when he did.

Slowly, by degrees, he pulled himself out of the ball he'd curled into. He tried to stand and fell before he even got to his knees. He'd...he'd crawl then. He was enough of a useless, weak piece of trash as it was, he shouldn't make a mess on top of that. He had to get to the bin.

His arms shook, trying to hold up his weight, and he dismissed his wings so he'd be lighter. It...didn't help much. He managed to pull himself only a foot or two before his arms gave out. His heart pounded too fast in his throat, making him feel even sicker, and he let himself lie on the nice, cool stone of the floor for a moment, gasping and weeping, gathering what little strength he had.

Slowly, he tried to pull himself forward, not even *trying* to lift himself anymore, just pushing painfully with his feet, his knees, his hands, whatever he could get a moment's leverage on.

It was...very slow. The blanket dragged off his back and down his legs, giving him a measure of his progress. It was halfway down Xiao's calves when he finally gave up and just lay there, not fighting the tears or the moans anymore, just enduring, just existing.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been lying there when he felt a hand on his arm, and realized the light from the shield was gone, only leaving the anemo-attuned lights he'd been taught to use earlier. Panic tried to surge for a moment but withered and died under the weight of his exhaustion. The hand moved, and he felt himself lifted - again fear tried to seize Xiao's mind, but it was too hard to feel anything but his misery. Why bother being afraid, if he couldn't *do* anything?

He was set down again on something soft, and lost track of time again.

Something cool and damp was on his forehead, and it felt incredible. He was otherwise cocooned in warmth, and a hand gently stroked his hair. A deep voice spoke soothingly, though he couldn't make out the words...he somehow felt *safe*.

Awareness drifted.

He couldn't breathe. Something was blocking his throat and he was choking and tears were running down his face and...

Someone lifted him, turned him on his side, put a container under his face.

"Cough, Xiao. You will be fine, just cough it up - "

That would be more reassuring if the voice didn't sound desperate. He obeyed anyway, and something glooped out of his mouth and into the bin. He coughed several more times before he was able to drag in a ragged breath, and more after that before his throat stopped spasming.

"Good, Xiao, good. Now just rest...you will get through this..."

The hands were rough and warm as they settled him again, like sun-baked stone. He was put on his side this time, and the cool cloth back on his head felt like...he didn't have the words. He could barely think anyway.

The fingers were running through his hair again, and somehow they made the misery fade a little.

He tried to lean into them, but wasn't sure he moved.

Awareness drifted...

A peeping sound forced its way into his awareness, and Xiao groaned. That was...important. It meant he had to do something. But he didn't want to move, he wasn't as miserable right now and if he moved he knew it would all come back...

"Xiao, can you hear me? Please say something, I don't know how to deal with this if you cannot respond...Xiao, wake up, I know you are exhausted and miserable but - "

That voice. That was...Master, wasn't it? He had to obey Master. How had he not noticed his presence?! A faint thread of alarm ran through Xiao, and he opened eyes he didn't remember closing. Everything was blurry, bright light that stabbed at his eyes and shapes he couldn't make out - he closed them again quickly.

"Master?"

He heard an odd sound, and then he was lifted into a sitting position. Xiao felt himself sway until hands landed on his shoulders, holding him steady.

"Xiao, your energy levels have gotten too high. I know you are not...terribly coherent right now, but I need you to use up some of that power. I have made a temporary alcove in here to aim for, and can contain any spillover...can you make me a cyclone in there, as strong as you can? Or if you cannot focus enough for that, simply direct as much wind and power as you can in that direction? I promise, I will not let you harm anything."

Master had given him an order, and he had to obey. Xiao forced his eyes open. There was a large, blurry, darker rectangle in front of him. He hoped that was the alcove.

It was a good thing Master had given him an alternative, because he didn't think he had much control right now.

Xiao glared at the rectangle, willing wind at it, and air blasted past him towards it. The wind currents bounced, making little cyclones of their own that he felt dancing in the room. He kept at it, struggling to focus, to stay awake, throwing all his focus and strength and misery and pain at that dark rectangle.

He didn't know if he'd done enough to satisfy Master when his awareness drifted away again.

"Are you sure?"

Master's voice drifted into his awareness, and Xiao realized his teeth were chattering again. He tried to curl deeper under the warm weight covering him, but to his frustration, his body hardly twitched.

"My own alert will tell me if his fever gets dangerously high, and I'll come to help you deal with it

if it does. Otherwise, sweating the toxins out is part of the process. Yes, I'm sure. Either give him more blankets or make the room warmer, for now. If he stops shivering, you can slowly reduce that. Just try to keep him comfortable, and switch out the sheets and blankets as they get soaked."

"Is there nothing else I can do? I...I hate seeing him like this."

He wondered who else was sick. He knew *he* wasn't important enough for the level of concern in the voices.

"What you *have* been doing. The damp cloth on his forehead probably feels wonderful. Being here with him so he's not alone, taking care of him while he can't do things for himself. It won't last forever, Morax."

Fingers slowly ran through Xiao's hair, and he felt himself relax and start to drift again.

"I just wish I could do more..."

Xiao was being lifted again, moved to a sitting position. His head fell back limply, which made it hard to breathe, but he didn't have the strength to lift it.

It was hard to care anyway. His pounding head was holding most of his attention.

A hand shifted to keep his head upright, and he dimly realized he felt Master nearby. Was he the one doing this? Did he need Xiao for something? He...he'd *try*, but...his eyes burned. He wanted to cry. Whatever Master wanted, he probably wouldn't be able to do it, and then...

"It is alright, Xiao. I'll let you lie back down in a minute. I just need you to drink this, okay? Your fever is drying you out, and there is medicine in the tea that should help you feel better."

He realized there was something pressed against his lips. All he had to do was drink something? That...that didn't sound too hard. He let his jaw fall open and hot liquid poured into his mouth - too hot, really, it burned but why did that matter? It didn't hurt as much as his head...

The liquid started to run down his throat, and he started coughing as it tried to run into his lungs. The cup was quickly pulled away and he was leaned forward. A hand stroked his hair gently as he continued to cough weakly. Eventually the coughing stopped, though his breathing still felt...weird. Rough and wet, maybe a little bubbly. Difficult.

He didn't like it.

His head hurt more now...

"Let's try that again. Just...swallow it this time, instead of breathing it, Xiao. I know it is hard to think, to do anything, but please..."

...Master shouldn't be pleading with him. Why was Master pleading with him?

He was moved more upright, and the cup was placed at his mouth again. This time, when the liquid came, he remembered to swallow. It was...hard. Slower than it should be, and exhausting. He almost forgot again part way through.

Eventually there wasn't any more being poured in, and the hands left. He sat there, feeling himself

wobble back and forth. A shiver ran through him, and he felt so dizzy...how could he feel so dizzy with his eyes closed? Then the hands were back and laying him back down and suddenly the dizzy merged with his throbbing head and the changing position and he needed to throw up...

It didn't work very well, the first heave. It got to his mouth and then ran back down the wrong part of his throat that just got scalded and it *hurt* and then he was on his side and the hands were holding him half off an edge and it was coming right back up and he couldn't *breathe* because he was always either coughing or heaving and he felt so *weak* and it *hurt* and he couldn't stop crying and Master must be so disgusted with him and it never seemed to *end*.

But it must have ended, because he eventually realized he was lying down again, propped on his side with that wonderful damp cloth on his forehead...

Something smelled delicious. He wanted it so badly...he tried to reach for it, but his hand was seized and held down and he started to wake up and the smell started to fade. He felt drool on his chin, but ignored it, staring anxiously at the blurry shape holding his arms down...eventually it resolved into Master.

Master looked...scared? Why?

But the smell was gone and with it the sudden surge of energy.

After a moment Master let go, and he barely felt his chin being wiped as the room faded away again.

Something was wrong.

Something was terribly, horribly wrong.

Ice coated Xiao's spine and he shivered, trying to figure out what his instincts were screaming at him.

"Did you think you could escape me so easily?"

He knew that voice.

He knew that voice.

"Did you think I was actually *dead*?"

A terrible laugh filled the frosty air, and his insides knotted up and dried into a crumbly ball. No, no, it couldn't be, the orders had left his head, the gem was gone -

But he started to feel the old restrictions and instructions and pressure rising up again in his brain, and he began to shake as he realized it was true, it was somehow true...or was all the time since the battle just an illusion, a dream, a hallucination?

He was terrified to open his eyes, but he had to *know*.

Master Moharus stood at the foot of the bed, bloody sword in hand. Master Morax was crumpled in the corner, a line of blood running from the corner of his mouth. Everything, *everything* was coated in frost, icicles stabbing from the ceiling and growing up from the floor, coating the room in ice, starting to coat the bed, reaching for him in spurts and he was too weak to even *move*...

'No no nono this can't be happening please no...'

“Thought to serve a monster like yourself, rather than a true god, hmm? Only to be expected of filth, I suppose, but you still must pay the price for your weakness. Your *betrayal*. How I thought scum like yourself would ever prove useful, I don't know.”

Master Moharus vanished and reappeared standing over him, the sword that had slain Master Morax now pointed at Xiao's belly. He would still cling to that name, even if, even if...

“This is just the start, you know. I have no intention of letting you off easy.”

The ice reached his limbs, binding him in place as the sword plunged down, and he finally found the strength to scream.

Chapter End Notes

If the next chapter isn't already up when you read this, it will be very shortly! I'm uploading one right after the other, but filling out the forms does take a few minutes.

And Recovery

Chapter Notes

This is the second of two chapters I'm dropping right now, so if you haven't read Chapter 28 scroll up and hit the 'previous chapter' button!

TW: Forcible restraints, panic, uh....I think that's mostly it? Except it's a Morax chapter so assume blockheadedness.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiao twitched and moaned again, and Morax resumed stroking his hair. It seemed to help...not much did, and despite what Madame Ping had said earlier, he couldn't help but worry that the young adeptus only seemed to be getting worse.

He supposed he should be glad Xiao was not panicking at his touch, but that could have more to do with his current state than their hopefully-improving relationship.

The boy moaned again and flopped onto his back. That was more movement than he'd managed since his condition had deteriorated, and for a moment Morax thought it might be a sign of improvement...then he saw the wide-open eyes, skittering about like they were looking at something he couldn't see.

Hallucinations?

...if so, that could *not* be good...

The dragon's trepidations increased as he felt Madame Ping requesting entrance to the subspace. It was the middle of the night, this could only mean *her* alert had gone off - he let her in immediately and, with a moment's concentration, lit stones in the hall floor to lead her to the right room. He wasn't going to leave Xiao's side right now if he could help it.

Morax looked back down at Xiao to find a look of abject horror on his face, eyes moving between the foot of the bed and a corner of the room. *What was he seeing?* How could Morax help?! He hoped Madame Ping was running...then Xiao started thrashing in the bed with more strength than he should have *had* after this past day, muttering something with terror written on his face. He was forced to restrain the boy's limbs with stone before he hurt himself.

The god was shaking. He'd thought he had been terrified when he realized Xiao was trying to *eat his own dream*, but this...maybe it was just fresher, but he was shaken to his bones.

What was it Bosacius said for flashbacks and such?

"Xiao, it is...it is not real, listen to me, *please*, I...I am here for you..."

He kept running his fingers through the young adeptus' hair - as well as he could, Xiao hadn't stopped thrashing - but neither the words nor the gesture seemed to be helping. He heard the door open and turned desperate eyes to his head healer.

"Do you know what's wrong?"

“I...I think he is hallucinating...”

Suddenly Xiao switched from muttering to screaming, tears running down his face, thrashing harder than ever. Madame Ping had to shout to be heard.

“I need a reading, and then probably to do some healing. Hold him still for me?”

Morax nodded, and arched more stone over the bed to better immobilize the child. Knees, hips, shoulders...that should be sufficient...he himself sat back down next to Xiao, pinning his head still between one leg and a hand, and continuing to stroke his hair, hoping it helped at all, even the smallest amount.

The screams continued as Madame Ping laid a hand on the child's chest, and Morax realized he was still shaking. He...should not be shaking, he had to be strong for Xiao...but he couldn't seem to stop.

“Lose the blankets, drop the room temperature. His fever's gotten too high and that's probably why he's hallucinating.”

Madame Ping was clearly still working on him, so Morax simply obeyed and waited for more instructions. Pinned beneath stone along with Xiao, the blankets tore coming loose, but he could replace them easily enough, and the remaining bits would serve as padding on the restraints...his heart hurt with the knowledge that, as hard as the child had been thrashing, he would probably still have bruises.

Lowering the room temperature...was a little more complicated. He was not as sensitive to heat and cold as most beings, and he could not use Xiao's shivers fading as a measure this time...

“Will you tell me when I have the room cool enough?”

Madame Ping absently nodded, and he focused on his control of the subspace, gradually lowering the temperature. Xiao's screams tapered off into quiet sobbing - Morax hoped that was a good sign. After awhile, the healer nodded.

“That should do. I'll be a bit longer, he's developed more than one bleeding ulcer, and I want to get rid of them before I leave.”

He was not quite sure what those were, just that they were mentioned in conjunction with those who were particularly stressed - which made sense, he supposed. The dragon resumed stroking Xiao's hair, and the sobs gradually quieted.

He was pretty sure the child had passed out again...he dissolved the restraining stone.

Had it really only been a single day since he had been woken by the alert? Morax had known long days before, waiting for an enemy to make their move, for word back from scouts, that interminable day when they had lost Guili, lost *Guizhong* ...but this one had his nerves frayed to the snapping point. If Madame Ping didn't have something positive to tell him when she finished...he did not know what he would do. Hopefully, not break down.

More people than this child needed him capable of function, as hard as that truth was.

Finally, the healer sighed and leaned back. He kept stroking Xiao's hair, hoping that he took some comfort from it, even asleep. Thankfully, Madame Ping did not keep him waiting too long.

“I took care of the ulcers, and what other signs of strain I could. Dendro isn't well suited to deal

with a fever directly, but it seemed to be starting to come down on its own once I'd done what I could...I'm hoping that means he's past the peak, now, and just needed the overall strain on his system reduced. I'll stick around for an hour or so just in case, though...have you been able to get him to drink anything?"

He shook his head, trying to swallow past a too-tight throat.

"He tries, when I ask him to. It does not stay down, and I...I find it hard to believe the attempt is worth the resulting misery."

Madame Ping sighed.

"As well that he isn't human, then. It's far less urgent than it would be for a mortal...but he *is* severely dehydrated, and if his fever continues to drop, I want you to push him on it again in a few hours. Not tea, to start, not even his medicinal one - chilled water with a bit of mint would probably be best."

He nodded, filing away the information, the majority of his attention on maintaining the even motion of his hand and on the shaky, hesitant sound of Xiao's breath.

"How are *you* holding up, old friend?"

He did not respond right away, considering how honest to be.

"Not well."

Morax stared down at Xiao's face, so pale except where it was flushed with fever, mouth slightly open to breathe. His voice was very quiet when he continued.

"Do you know, just before all this, he told me he thought he was a monster? Not just for what he was forced to do. He meant literally. He had been taught that any inhuman traits were proof of being a monster, a terrible, inherently evil being. He was shocked to see my true form."

He stroked the child's hair gently, using the necessity of keeping that touch even and light to maintain control.

"I wondered how we could teach him that he is good, when he does not even know what he is, what we all are. I tried to explain, but he seemed so confused...and then only hours later, he could not even move to reach the wastebin."

Morax looked up at his old friend, vision blurred with tears.

"How can we help him learn to be what he *should* be, when we can barely keep him alive, when all he knows has been so twisted? Where do we even start?"

Madame Ping was quiet for a long moment.

"We start as we have been. With kindness. With tending his hurts and illness as we can, with trust and openness. It isn't easy, and it takes time, and I'm sure our hearts will break many times along the way - I know mine already has - but I believe it's worth the pain. Do you?"

He didn't hesitate.

"Of course I do. I just...I do not know what I am doing, and...I am afraid. I am afraid I will hurt him deeply without even knowing it. I...am not a parent, I am not...I have taught on occasion, yes, but

only those already confident in themselves. I...”

Morax trailed off. He did not know how to express this, this feeling of helplessness and insufficiency inside him.

“You’ll learn. And I’ll help you, and Bosacius will help you, and eventually, Xiao himself will probably help you learn. You don’t have to be perfect, Morax. It’s alright to be new to something.”

“He does not need someone new to this. He needs someone who can understand him.”

“Morax, there *isn’t* anyone who can fully understand what he’s been through. As far as we know, he is the *only* living being who has survived such a situation for so long. He respects you, and from the looks of things, is beginning to trust you. That’s a good start. And from some of what Saish has told me...even if he’s *still* terrified of you when his head clears, I think he’d be more terrified if you removed yourself from the situation.”

He huffed.

“I do not think I could bring myself to do so anyway, at this point.”

“Good.”

Morax huffed again, and closed his eyes.

“Do you...truly believe, I am doing him more good than harm?”

”I do.”

He could only hope she was right.

As time passed, it became clear that Xiao’s fever truly had broken. Madame Ping left as soon as this was certain, leaving Morax to obsessively hover, changing the cloth on Xiao’s head whenever it got too warm or started to dry out, leaving the room only to prep the cool mint-water for when the child woke.

When he did, after the longest uninterrupted rest since this all began, Xiao started sobbing as soon as he saw Morax. At first the dragon thought he was upsetting the child, but when he started to back away, Xiao weakly tried to reach for him.

That was...unexpected. He sat next to him again, though, and after a moment’s consideration, stretched his human spine out into a smaller form of his tail for the young adeptus to hold. The end was fluffy, like some of the toys he saw mortal children clinging to, and his inhuman aspects had seemed to reassure the boy before all this started...

It seemed to be the right choice, though he concluded that it was a distinctly odd feeling having his tail gripped like that.

Unfortunately, Xiao fell back asleep like that before he could even suggest the water, still gripping Morax’s tail tighter than made sense. Nevermind. Madame Ping had said it was not as urgent for an adeptus, and...for whatever reason, this seemed to be a comfort for the boy. Morax found he did not want to disturb him...

Morax's tail *ached*.

What parts of it he could feel, anyway. Where Xiao gripped it had long since gone numb - and where the child found the strength for that *he* certainly didn't know. As for the rest of it...he had rather underestimated how inconvenient a tail was on an otherwise human form. Sitting on the bed meant it was bent at an uncomfortable angle, and arranging it to be...clamped onto...only made that worse.

He grimaced. He would be fine. He had endured worse for less reason in the past.

Still, he was...tethered, in place, and could not even dampen the cloth on the boy's forehead with what was in reach. It was annoying.

And as the young adeptus continued to improve, and his own concern lessened, the god had to admit he was incredibly *bored*.

As annoying as that was, he had to admit it was better than the constant stress and worry...so with a sigh, he formed a bit of crystal in the hand that *was not* occupied stroking Xiao's hair, and began trying to form the interior lattice into words.

A request for entrance pulled Morax's attention from the crystal some time later, and he let Indarias in. The floor was still lit to lead visitors to this room, so he just waited, and continued adding little decorations to the interior of the crystal, carefully angled to only be visible from certain directions.

The door slid open.

"Lord Morax, Menogias sent along some new clothes for Xiao, he says they're very basic but will -"

Suddenly she gasped and there was the sound of something soft hitting the floor. Morax instantly looked to Xiao, worried something had gone wrong, and when his condition looked unchanged, glowered at the pyro yaksha.

She had evidently dropped the stack of clothing she'd brought, and her hands were failing to cover a grin beneath very wide eyes. He sighed.

"Is that reaction really necessary, Indarias? And please keep it down, Xiao needs his rest."

Indarias immediately dropped her hands and bounced down to pick up the clothes.

"Sorry, my lord, but you two just look *adorable*! Is he doing any better?"

'Adorable'? He grumbled deep in his throat and returned his gaze to the crystal he was working on.

"He appears to be past the worst of it, yes. I believe you had more you were intending to say?"

"Ah...right, Menogias said these clothes are 'very plain but will at least allow Xiao to summon his

wings without having to rip his shirt', and that he'll make better ones once he knows what sort of things Xiao likes."

She looked around a moment, then set the stack down on the marble dresser.

"Was there anything else, Indarias?"

"Not...really...but I'm really glad to see you two getting along so well!"

The grin on her face looked ready to split it in half, and Morax sighed again. He had a suspicion that descriptions of their 'adorableness' would spread within the Yaksha Pavilion in the next few hours...especially with his marshal away, and unable to keep her in check. A headache began to pulse behind his eyes.

"Thank you, Indarias. Before you leave, could you stop by the kitchen and bring me the glass of water with mint in the cryo box? As you can see, I am...unable to retrieve it myself, at the moment."

"Of course, my lord!"

He winced at the bright, *loud* tone and quickly looked at Xiao - luckily, he seemed undisturbed. He would have to have a word with the yaksha about *remembering* what she was told - later. It could wait until things were a little more settled.

Indarias returned quickly with the water - currently mostly frozen, as he'd suspected it would be, by now. If he was lucky, Xiao would wake up shortly after it finished thawing.

"Thank you, Indarias. And pass my thanks on to Menogias for the clothing."

It was a clear dismissal, and luckily, she was not too excited to see it.

"Of course, my lord."

And she was gone. Finally.

Really, where the girl found so much energy...

A quiet gasp alerted Morax when the boy finally awoke. He looked over to find that his long-numb tail had been released, and that Xiao was staring at it with wide eyes.

He wondered why...he had seen it, albeit larger, on his true form. Surely he remembered?

"Ah, you are awake. Are you feeling better?"

The young adeptus' eyes snapped to his and then down.

"Y-yes, Master. Th-this one apologizes for...for..."

"You have nothing to apologize for, young one. I specifically shaped it onto this form for your comfort. Do you think you can sit up, or would you like my help?"

Immediately the child began struggling to sit up, and Morax moved to help him as soon as it

became clear it *was* a struggle - only for him to flinch away from the god's touch. He sighed. He had known, suspected, that tolerance would wane once the boy was more aware of his surroundings, but he had hoped...

It had been...pleasant, while it lasted.

He at least managed to get away with shifting the pillows behind Xiao's back so he could have support sitting there, instead of needing to move further.

The child was shaking when Morax leaned back from doing so, and he frowned worriedly. He should not have refused help if he was still so weak. Yet...if he was once more uncomfortable with his touch, he should not push it on the child. Bosacius and Madame Ping would tear him up one side and down the other if he neglected their warnings on that score.

"Madame Ping suggested you drink some mint-infused water when you woke. Can you hold the glass?"

He had his opinions on that score, but...he must not undo the progress they had made...

"Yes, Master."

"Very well."

Morax passed Xiao the glass that had been waiting on the nightstand, carefully not letting go until he was certain the child had a good grip, and then watching carefully just in case. His worries were apparently unfounded, however - while the boy seemed even shakier, he did not spill.

He did, unfortunately, gulp the whole glass down immediately, just as he had his broth and tea the other day. The dragon tensed, expecting the worst - but while the young adeptus made a face after, there was no sign he needed the wastebin. He sighed with relief.

"Very good, Xiao."

An awkward silence descended, and after a moment, Morax gently took the glass from Xiao.

"I...I will just take this to the kitchen and be right back. Will you be alright?"

"Y-yes, Master..."

Why did the child look so confused?

Would he get an answer, if he asked?

Probably not.

He stood, and winced as his tail thunked on the floor. It did not hurt, but it was undignified, and he could not shift it back while it was still numb.

"D-did this one h-hurt Master?"

What? Oh, his tail.

"Not at all. Just stay there and rest, Xiao. I will return shortly."

As he walked, he thought furiously. He had not expected so much sudden lucidity - he would need to keep the boy's mind occupied or he would undoubtedly insist on getting out of that bed. What

could he...

Ah. Bosacius had commented that the young adeptus appeared to be completely illiterate - that was why he was illustrating the words in the crystal with related scenes. Perhaps he could start teaching Xiao how to read? He had never taught anyone that before, but surely it was not that hard. Reading was basically listening, but with eyes and paper instead of ears and air. It was not like the child didn't know the language.

Plan in place, he hurried back to the bird room - only to find the poor child had passed out again.

Apparently, he had not recovered quite as much as it had seemed.

The next time Xiao woke up, it was just in time for Madame Ping to check him out more thoroughly. Morax waited nervously by the door while she worked, having been shooed away as soon as the healer got a good look at the pair of them. Did that mean his presence was, once again, unwanted by the child?

...he hoped not.

"You are recovering well, little one. I think you're past the worst of it now, but I want you to stay on bed rest, except for your daily cyclone, for another three days to be sure. Morax, I want you to keep up shielding his room at night for at least a week, just in case, but his cravings should be significantly reduced now."

The dragon nodded. So...he had at least another week with Xiao. Once he was off bedrest...Hmm. The child never had gotten a proper look at that mural, had he? And perhaps...if he retained enough of the trust he had been shown the last couple days...he knew just the place to put a door opening into a valley. He could construct the bare bones, and then invite the young adeptus to help him design the details.

He wanted this small, frightened child to know happiness and wonder. Even as harsh as his own childhood had been, he'd had that.

"...and unless you have any questions, I think that covers it. Morax?"

He startled, and realized he had missed some of what had been said...but he was pretty sure the important part had been in the beginning. He could easily infer that Xiao should take it easy past those three days.

"I have no questions at this time."

"Xiao?"

"This one has no questions, honorable one."

Madame Ping nodded.

"Alright then. I'll be back to check on you again tomorrow, little one."

Xiao nodded, and Morax fidgeted a little as Madame Ping left, toying with the pouch in his pocket. Once he had felt her leave the subspace, he approached the bed. The young adeptus sat staring at

the blankets...he hoped this would help.

“Xiao, I have something for you.”

He withdrew the pouch, and feeling the object within it one last time, hoping he had not forgotten anything, he set it on the blankets over the child’s lap.

“Go ahead, open it.”

After a moment, Xiao opened the pouch and dumped the anemo-green crystal into his palm, then immediately froze, staring at it.

“It has been mentioned that you seem to feel...less than secure in your place here, and unsure of what to expect. If you look closely, there is writing in the center of that crystal. It lists out my side of our contract.”

To care for,

To protect,

To see healed,

Until such time as the healing is complete.

“I know you cannot read at this time, but I intend for you to learn, or at least make a start while under my care. In the meantime, if you tilt the crystal, you will find images that represent the things I have contracted to do for you.”

Slowly, Xiao lifted the crystal and tilted it, looking at it this way and that, eyes widening.

“Do with it as you like - it is yours - but I hope the concrete listing of what you can expect from me helps you feel more secure.”

Xiao clutched the little crystal to his chest and stared up at Morax, mouth opening and closing a few times before he spoke.

“Th-this one most deeply appreciates Master’s generosity.”

It was certainly the...oddest...thank you he had ever received, but it was obvious Xiao liked his gift. Morax beamed back at him, glad to have done something right.

Chapter End Notes

And thus ends arc 2! Next chapter will begin arc 3, aka the fluff arc, but that...might be a bit...since I fully expect the game update to put me in full Kaeya brainrot mode for awhile. I hope you enjoyed these two chapters!

End Notes

There is now a server on discord for discussing my fics, other fics, Genshin, etc, where there might occasionally be snippets and/or me asking your opinions on which sidestory to tackle first! Feel free to join~

Current invite link: <https://discord.gg/HNd66d6NyG>

Let me know if it's expired!

Sleep deep and dream well!

Works inspired by this one [you don't have to be a ghost \(here amongst the living\)](#) by [lilysweetdreams](#),
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